Democracy's Light

Democracy's Right - 3

Christopher G. Nuttall

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

The Empire — a tyranny stretching over thousands of worlds, run by the corrupt and evil Thousand Families. Freedom, justice and liberty are a joke. Resistance is futile. From the formerly independent worlds crushed by the Empire, to the slaves and workers bred for their role, to the personnel of the Imperial Navy itself, rebellion seethes, but freedom seems a dream…

The Rebel — Colin Harper, betrayed by a superior officer, assigned to a useless backwater and forced to become compliant in terrible crimes, has a plan. He and his fellows will seize their ships and provide a focus for a galaxy seething with helpless rage under the Empire's rule…

[I wrote this complete series some years ago and (after getting feedback) revised book one. These are the original three volumes of the series.

I wanted to write a series looking at a rebellion, those who might have reason to resist the rebels — and what happens after the rebels win… Did I succeed? You tell me.]

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Christopher G. Nuttall
DEMOCRACY'S LIGHT
(Colin's War, Book 3)

Prologue

"Emergence," the helm officer said. "Captain, we have emerged precisely in the designated emergence zone."

Captain Martin Salaam smiled as the cruiser reverted to normal space, so gently that all he felt was a twist in his stomach. "Excellent," he said, as the display started to fill up with icons. The flicker drive made precision impossible — which was why designated emergence zones were so vast, even by interplanetary standards — but the helmsman had done well. He'd also been lucky. "Communications, transmit our IFF and the data packet to System Command."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. By now, the defenders of Cottbus would be responding to the unscheduled arrival of the cruiser squadron, although they would probably suspect its purpose. Cottbus might be several thousand light years from Earth, but they would know about the Rebellion and quite probably about the Fall of Earth. "I've transmitted the signal."

Salaam nodded, leaning back into his command chair and studying the display thoughtfully. Cottbus was almost exactly on the opposite side of the Empire to most of the fighting and looked relatively untouched, although several starships had defected from the Sector to join the Rebellion. Two squadrons of superdreadnaughts lurked along the outer edge of the gravity shadow, while hundreds of smaller ships and commercial vessels piled their trade throughout the system. Cottbus, one of the industrial hubs for the sector, looked to be gearing up for war.

Garry Owen and her fellow cruisers had been dispatched from Earth in the wake of the final battle, when the Thousand Families had surrendered their authority to the Provisional Government. The mission, directly from Admiral Harper himself, had been simple enough, but dangerous; they were to update the various Imperial Navy bases and starships on what had happened and, hopefully, accept their loyalty to the new regime. It wasn't going to be easy. The higher the rank, the more likely it was that the officer would be a client of the Thousand Families, or someone else with a vested interest in keeping the Empire as it had been before the Rebellion. It was quite possible that Admiral Wilhelm would agree to join the new order… or that he would order his ships to rebel against the rebels.

Salaam's lips twitched. He'd been a junior officer when the rebellion had begun and he'd seized control of *Garry Owen* by leading a mutiny against her former Captain, a tyrant with wandering hands. Admiral Wilhelm was unlikely to find anything to love in him, let alone the others who had formed the original conspiracy that had

toppled the Empire. An alliance of Rim-dwellers, renegades, freebooters, first-rank worlds and mutinous Imperial Navy officers would be anthemia to him, although in the absence of any surviving faction from the Families, he would have to rebel in his own name if he decided to oppose the Provisional Government. He didn't have a reputation as a tyrant, an officer who would be removed from command in the general house-cleaning of the Rebellion, but he would fear for his own future.

And I wonder what he intends to do with all of those superdreadnaughts, he thought, as he took in their heightened state of preparedness. A civilian would not have understood, but to an experienced officer — and Salaam was experienced — there were a thousand cues as to the state of the hovering giants of space. They weren't the degraded beasts of Home Fleet, or of the Morrison Sector Fleet before Admiral Joshua Wachter introduced Admiral D'Ammassa to the joys of breathing hard vacuum, but fully-armed and refitted ships, itching for battle. Admiral Wilhelm, or whoever was in charge, was clearly determined to build up as powerful a fleet as possible.

"We are receiving a communication," the communications officer said. "They're ordering us — all of us — to proceed at once to rendezvous with the command fortress."

"Disregard," Salaam ordered. "The *Caidin* is to remain outside the gravity shadow and keep watch. The remainder of the squadron are to follow us."

The sheer size of the defences impressed him as the squadron tilted into the gravity shadow and heading down towards the command fortress. It was a massive station, fully twice as vast as a superdreadnaught, so large that it was visible against the blue-green glow of the planet beyond. All of that ponderous tonnage, he knew, would be weapons and support systems; no orbital platform needed to worry about drives, or anything beyond very limited manoeuvring capability. There was enough firepower packed into the station's bulk to vaporise an unshielded superdreadnaught in a single shot… and there were no less than fifteen of them, orbiting the planet in high orbit. Below the platforms, surrounded by automated missile and energy weapon platforms, were dozens of asteroids, mainly floating industrial habitats.

He pulled up the briefing data from the computers and scanned it quickly. Cottbus had been claimed by the Hohenzollern Family back in the founding years of the Empire and, as a Family-owned enterprise, had blossomed. The workers down on the planet would live in a state of neo-feudalism, born and bred to serve as workers for the Hohenzollerns… and probably unaware of anything beyond their own world. Some such worlds, such as Pollack, had managed to

nurture rebellious groups regardless, but others had not… and no one knew where Cottbus stood. The presence of so many ships and orbital defences was probably a bad sign. No one could dominate a planet without unquestioned control of space.

"Direct link from *Caidin*," the communications officer said, suddenly. "They're being ordered to join us and rendezvous with the command station."

Salaam winced. "Tell them to disregard and remain where they are, unless directly threatened," he ordered. "I'm starting to have a very bad feeling about this."

"Yeah," the helmsman said. "I feel like I've been asked to fly right into the lion's jaws."

"Captain," the tactical officer said, suddenly. "I'm picking up targeting emissions from the command station!"

Salaam swore. It *could* be just a drill, but Imperial Navy Regulations specifically forbade lighting anyone up with targeting sensors unless you *intended* to shoot at them, or in the midst of a properly prepared and planned exercise. No one in their right mind would risk it, unless they intended to open fire…

"Evasive manoeuvres," he snapped. They were far too close to the command station and even though they were outside energy range, the station could fire enough missiles to overwhelm their combined point defence without even trying. "Contact the *Caidin* and order them to *move*…"

"Missiles fired," the tactical officer said. "Incoming…"

The station blossomed with death, launching nearly five hundred missiles into the squadron. Salaam closed his eyes, even as the point defence opened fire, knowing that it was far too little, too late. Barely thirty seconds after the fortress opened fire, the missiles struck home and blasted *Garry Owen* into an expanding ball of plasma.

High overhead, *Caidin* turned to run, barely dodging a pair of battlecruisers that flickered in and attempted to engage the light cruiser. The cruiser flickered out, just in time to avoid a spread of missiles from the lead battlecruiser, carrying a desperate warning back to Earth.

The old order wasn't dead.

Not yet.

Chapter One

"It was a raid, of course."

"I highly doubt it," Admiral Markus Wilhelm said, as he replayed the brief encounter between his command fortress and the eight cruisers. "If they had intended to raid the defences, they certainly would not have come within range of my fortresses, would they?"

Lady Madeline Hohenzollern scowled at him. Markus Wilhelm was a short barrel-chested man, wearing a carefully tailored uniform that somehow made him the focus of every person in the room. As the Hohenzollern Sector's Commanding Officer, he had once been one of her clients, carefully promoted and rewarded to ensure his loyalty to the Hohenzollern Clan. Six months after the Fall of Earth and the success of the Rebellion, she *needed* him, more than he needed her. The question she had never been able to answer — yet — was if he knew that. So much had changed in the two years since Colin Harper, a lowly battlecruiser first officer, had first raised the standard of revolt, right on the other side of the Empire.

"They came here to demand that you submitted to their authority and renounced your ties to the Clan," she said, shortly. "You had no choice, but to open fire."

Wilhelm shrugged. "I had hoped that I would be able to induce them to dock — all nine of them — and replace their crews with people loyal to me," he said. "They smelt enough of a rat, however, to ensure that any perfidy on my part would be noticed… and so I destroyed them." He shrugged again. "We always knew that we wouldn't be able to remain unnoticed forever."

"How true," Madeline said. "And now, what will the rebels do?"

She'd fled Earth in the wake of the surrender, after Home Fleet had been blasted to plasma by the rebel Shadow Fleet, and set course for the Hohenzollern Sector. Her Clan owned almost the entire sector, including the massive shipyard complex orbiting Cottbus, and it was a natural place to begin her counterattack. The discovery that the rebels — and the entire population of the Empire — hated her and her Clan enough to tear them apart had shocked her… and filled her with new determination to return in triumph and wreck vengeance on her foes.

When she'd reached Cottbus, however, she'd been surprised to discover that Admiral Wilhelm had already been making preparations for continuing the war. Admirals had been officially discouraged from forming links with their compatriots — in the old days, Imperial Intelligence would have looked sharply at any Admiral who didn't have a rivalry with his neighbouring Admiral — but Wilhelm had

somehow linked up with at least three other Admirals… and apparently had been doing so even before the Fall of Earth. She'd attached herself to him at once, hoping that she would be able to exercise control, but she was completely dependent on him and knew it.

"They'll come here, of course," Stacy Roosevelt said, from her position in the corner of the room. Her perfect face twisted into a *moue* of disgust. "They'll come here and die."

Wilhelm and Madeline shared a long look. Stacy Roosevelt had first-hand experience of rebel perfidy… when they'd stolen an entire squadron of superdreadnaughts out from under her nose, instantly transforming Colin Harper from yet another Rim Warlord to a genuine threat. She'd been returned, probably in the hopes that her presence would hamper the Empire's war effort, and attempted to take control of the Roosevelt Clan in the wake of the murder of its head, officially at rebel hands. (It still bothered Madeline that she had no idea who had ordered the assassination, although there was no shortage of suspects.) She'd succeeded just in time for the Roosevelt Clan to collapse completely… and had insisted on accompanying Madeline to Cottbus, convinced that she was the victim of a ghastly plot. The only thing she was good for, in Madeline's increasingly exasperated opinion, was cannon fodder.

"Eventually, yes," Wilhelm agreed, his own exasperation carefully concealed. He seemed to think that there might be a use for her in the future. "They do, however, have vast problems; someone else might have decided to rebel against the rebels as well. The implications of them having sent a squadron of cruisers to pass on their message are interesting. They may not feel that they have the strength to send out a stronger message, in stronger ships."

He nodded towards the display. "And in any case," he continued, "the delay suits us well. The longer we have to prepare, the better. If they give us long enough, we can start dictating terms to them. Perhaps it is time to commence stage two."

Madeline followed his eyes. Cottbus had been a major industrial hub even before her Clan had taken it over and developed it into one of the Empire's major success stories, a world that produced goods and supplies for an entire sector. Now, the tempo of activity that had begun when news of the rebellion finally reached Earth had only increased, with new starships under frantic construction and older ones being repaired and refitted to modern standards. Home Fleet, and most of the inner Sector Fleets, had been allowed to degrade, but Wilhelm was rapidly restoring his ships to battle condition. They would be a formidable threat if the rebels allowed them time to build up and deploy towards Earth.

The combined firepower of three sectors was a formidable force, even with the starships suffering from benign neglect. Seven squadrons of superdreadnaughts, twelve squadrons of battlecruisers and hundreds of heavy cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers, if they remained concentrated, would force the rebels to sit up and take notice. They might not be able to retake Earth yet — Wilhelm had disabused her of that notion right at the start — but the rebels would be forced to either come to terms with them or make a major deployment of their own to counter the loyalist forces. They might have been good, but standard doctrine warned that a three-to-one advantage was required in space warfare… and making such a commitment would draw almost the entire rebel fleet into the sector, away from Earth. The possibilities were endless.

"Stage two is doomed to failure," Stacy said, petulantly. She'd been excluded from that planning session and resented it. She thought that she was important merely because of her name and social status, but Madeline outranked her and Wilhelm didn't care. "Why the hell should they respect us?"

Madeline smiled. "If we tell them that we liberated this sector from the *evil* and *oppressive* rule of the Hohenzollern Clan, but we don't intend to join the new order, they're going to have to make some hard decisions," she said. "They can talk to us — after all, they're going to want the shipyards here if nothing else — and respect us as equals, allowing us to send representatives to their new Parliament. Carefully chosen representatives, of course. If they want to try to take us by force, what sort of message will they send to the other worlds and communities in the Empire?"

"If they invade this sector at once," Wilhelm added, "they'll tell them that they're just the same as the old order, only more ruthless. If they start building up to confront us, they're going to have to continue expanding their own armed forces, when they really need to reduce their commitment to building new starships and work to repair the economy. I suspect that eventually they'll decide to invade us anyway… but by then, we will be formidable enough to convince them that it might be a bad idea."

He strode over to his desk and tapped a command into his terminal. "We've chosen very carefully," he said. "The people who will be going to Earth as our official representatives to their new Parliament are all very closely tied to the Hohenzollern Clan and myself. They will speak for us and put forward the view that while we have no objections to rejoining the Empire, we insist on policies that will prevent further disruption, such as altering the economic base of the Empire, or in giving aliens and slaves civil rights and suchlike. All a stall, of course, but they will have to pretend to take it seriously."

Madeline nodded. The Empire wasn't particularly racist, at least where humans were concerned; it was a nonsensical concept when skin colour could be changed as easily as a suit of clothes. Madeline herself, in her younger days, had been black, then green, then orange and finally palest white, all in line with the dictates of the fashion gurus of the High City. Aliens, however, were a different story. After the Dathi War and centuries of anti-alien propaganda, the average human detested and loathed the eight known alien races within the Empire, although very few had actually met an alien in person. The rebels might have spoken in terms of taking humanity's collective boot off the aliens' collective neck, but it would horrify billions of people, while raising unreasonable expectations in the minds of aliens that remembered, however dimly, a universe that had had no humans. Would they do unto humanity as humanity had done unto them?

It wasn't a minor fear. No one knew what had driven the Dathi to their war, but everyone knew that it had meant certain death for the human race… and every human world they encountered. A thousand years after the last Dathi had been exterminated, the scars of the war still resounded in humanity's soul, a memory of the time when humanity had united into the Empire. No one would do anything to risk another war on such a scale… except, perhaps, the rebels.

"And if they don't?" Stacy demanded. She didn't understand. "Why should they?"

"There are a thousand worlds, give or take a few hundred, that are probably on the verge of seeking independence," Wilhelm drawled, lazily. "The first-rank worlds will want to turn their autonomy into real independence. The second-rank worlds will want to speed up their progress towards first-rank. The third-rank worlds will merely want to be rid of the overseers and supervisors." He shrugged. "If the rebels move to squash us, and they could, they will convince others that they're going to be forced to remain where they are, or worse. After all, the autonomy of the first-rank worlds was broken at Gaul, wasn't it?"

Madeline kept her face blank through long experience. She had played a major role in the decision — flawed, she saw now — to order Gaul, a first-rank autonomous worlds, scorched for harbouring contacts with the rebels. The Battle of Gaul had been a disaster of the first-rank — she smiled bitterly at the pun — and convinced the remaining first-rank worlds that the Empire had become a mad dog and needed to be put down, regardless of the cost. They'd added their forces, as primitive and weak as they were, to the rebel Shadow Fleet… and brought down Home Fleet in a pitched battle in the solar system. It had been unbelievable, but the core of the Empire had been defeated… and she'd had to run and hide.

Wilhelm took her silence for assent. “They’re done something they shouldn’t have done and allowed billions of people to develop expectations of what’s going to happen in the new order,” he continued. “That’s going to ensure that the steady decline of the Empire becomes a collapse, unless they lock the brakes on tight, and if they do that… they’re going to have several rebellions on their hands. They really need time to let the air out gradually and reshape the Empire, but we’re not going to give them that time. In a year or two, maybe less, people are going to start asking why they even bothered to rebel at all?”

“I remain unconvinced,” Stacy said, finally. She glared up at the display, showing the best guesses as to the location and disposition of rebel forces, as if it were a personal enemy. “We should launch an immediate strike against…”

“And you will be silent,” Wilhelm said, pleasantly. His tone brought her up short. Even she couldn’t miss the underlying threat. “Your incompetence cost the Imperial Navy its only chance of nipping the rebellion in the bud. You will be silent unless you are spoken to, or you will be removed to far less pleasant accommodation — Butcher, perhaps.”

Stacy stared at him. Butcher was a penal world, one where the plants and most of the animals were implacable hostile to the human settlers, forcing the colonists — mainly criminals and rebels — to fight constantly for survival. The plants might not have been intelligent, although the researchers were uncertain on that score, but they certainly enjoyed eating human flesh. Butcher had a horrific reputation and a constant appetite for new victims — quite literally. It didn’t help that the plants were thoroughly inedible and poisonous. The handful of people who ate them died in screaming agony.

“I will…”

She turned, abruptly, and left the chamber. Madeline smiled to herself. For the first time since her father had died, someone had actually managed to get through to Stacy and convince her of her proper place in the universe. Her hard core had shattered, revealing the coward underneath. Wilhelm had a loyal command staff and complete authority over the system. He could do *anything* to her and, now, they both knew it.

“Well done,” Madeline said, finally. She wondered, grimly, if the underlying lesson was intended for her. Stacy couldn’t be a threat — her very incompetence worked against her — but she was something different, wasn’t she? “You actually got her to sit up and pay attention.”

“Yes,” Wilhelm said. His next words left her in no doubt. “And I expect you to pay attention as well. How many other operations have

been… compromised because of a high-ranking idiot with connections to the right people?"

Madeline hesitated. "I have no idea," she said, finally. She took a wild guess. "A dozen?"

"Try thousands," Wilhelm said, smiling coldly. "From the start of the rebellion itself to the decision to scorch Gaul, a person with more connections than brain cells managed to take an operation that should have worked properly and destroyed it, dead in its tracks. If rebel propaganda is to be believed, everyone who took part in the early mutinies was thoroughly pissed on by their superiors, high-ranking idiots all."

He leaned towards her, his cold eyes holding hers. "I will not allow that to happen here," he said. She hadn't realised that he could command such… *presence*. "I will not allow you, or Stacy, whose test scores suggested that she wasn't fit to command a garbage scow, to damage this operation. You will offer your advice, but I will be in command of the entire operation. If I catch you attempting to sabotage it in any way, I will make you wish that you had remained behind on Earth, understand?"

Madeline caught herself. She wasn't used to facing pressure, not so close and personal. The Clan had been her protection, her sword and her shield, safeguarding her from the realities of the universe and ensuring that she was never threatened… until the rebellion came and displaced her from her rightful place. Pride, sheer damned pride, kept her facing him. The urge to just surrender was almost overwhelming, backed up by fear of the possible consequences, but she couldn't — she wouldn't — give in.

"The Hohenzollern Clan made you," she protested, weakly. It sounded weak even to her, the voice of a little girl trying to protest to her mother. "We brought you up from nothing and made you our…"

"Slave," Wilhelm interrupted. "You made me your slave, fit only to scrape and bow before you, but now… now you need me, more than I need you." Madeline remembered her thoughts — it seemed like hours ago — and winced inwardly. "You will obey me and I will place you back where you belong, or you can try to rebel against me… and believe me, that won't be easy."

It wouldn't be, Madeline knew. Wilhelm had worked hard in the months since hearing of the rebellion… and, she realised now, must have had something like this in mind all along. He'd managed to replace or reassign junior officers who were equally dependent on the Hohenzollern Clan, or other elements of the Thousand Families, and had ensured that they were replaced with people who were loyal to him, their patron. In the old days, he could still be handled, countered, or replaced, but now… now, the entire Empire was up for

grabs. A competent officer in his position could go far.

"Well?" Wilhelm asked her, almost conversationally. He sat back, no longer looming over her, but the threat of sudden change was very real. "Are you going to work for me now?"

"Yes," Madeline said, finally. There was little point in holding out. He almost certainly wasn't bluffing about sending her and Stacy to Butcher… where no one would care who they were, if they were lucky. If they were unlucky… well, there were thousands of people there who hated her Clan, not without reason. The sudden shift in the balance of power made her dizzy and she knew she needed time to think, but Wilhelm wasn't letting her think. He had her over a barrel and knew it.

He smiled. "Yes, *what*?"

"Yes, *sir*," Madeline said, finally. It was a complete surrender, but who knew? Maybe there would be another shift in the balance of power before too long. If the remaining Thousand Families, on Earth, needed her… there might be another shift. "I will work for you."

"Excellent," Wilhelm said, projecting an image of false bonhomie. It was another tactic to disorient her and she knew it, but she was ashamed to admit that it was working. Months ago, she would have done the same thing herself… and Wilhelm had clearly been learning from her. "The representatives had been selected, their transport is prepared… and all that remains is to bid them farewell. Shall we go?"

Madeline nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Chapter Two

"Red Team, this is Red Leader," a voice said. "Follow me in and watch out for barnacles."

The starfighters altered course and flashed towards the old superdreadnaught, which was turning ponderously to face them. It had been in such a degraded condition that it hadn't been allowed to serve with Home Fleet at the Battle of Earth and, when Shadow Fleet technicians had had a careful look at it, had decided that it was beyond recovery. The hulk had been cannibalised of everything useful and then dispatched to the firing range as a target.

"All right, entering point defence range from my mark," Red Leader continued, his voice changing slightly as he took his flight into harm's way. "On my command, scatter and engage evasive tactics."

Space lit up as the superdreadnaught started to open fire, its point defence, optimised for tracking incoming missiles, lashing out towards the starfighters, which responded by running through a series of random evasive manoeuvres, dodging the fire with ease. From his vantage point, Colin Harper watched as the face of naval warfare in the year 4015 changed yet again. A superdreadnaught was normally capable of defending itself against any serious assault, although the salvos the arsenal ships had deployed during the rebellion had dwarfed anything that the pre-rebellion Empire had imagined, and could hope to take out half of the attacking missiles before they slammed home against its shields, but now…

The starfighters weren't acting like missiles, but more like completely random elements, dancing ever-closer to the massive ship while avoiding everything it fired at them. The superdreadnaught just couldn't compete as the starfighters slipped into energy range, avoiding the massive blasts from its fission cannons with ease. Weapons that could blast a destroyer or cruiser into free-floating atoms, or severely maul a fellow superdreadnaught could have vaporised a starfighter, if they had been allowed to catch it within its beam. The starfighters laughed at the defences and pressed closer, selecting their targets with ease.

"Entering engagement range now," Red Leader said, his voice growing in confidence as the starfighters came closer. "Firing missiles… now!"

The starfighter seemed to jerk on the display as it unleashed the two missiles slung below its stubby wings, firing them both towards the superdreadnaught, joined within seconds by missiles from the remaining eleven starfighters. The superdreadnaught ignored the starfighters now, desperately trying to take out the missiles before

they could strike the shield, but it was too late. One by one, the missiles reached the shield… and slipped through. Before the superdreadnaught could react, the first one struck home, slamming into the hull and detonating in a blast of thermonuclear fire.

"They didn't take it out," Colin said, perversely disappointed. No superdreadnaught had been damaged so easily during the fighting, even during the final moments of the Battle of Harmony, but somehow it was still intact. It was glowing in a dozen places, signs of fires and internal devastation, but it was still manoeuvring. It was, he supposed, a testament to the Empire's policy of armouring superdreadnaughts past all rhyme and reason. "Can it still flicker?"

"I suspect so," Commodore David Houston said. Colin had given him command of the 1st Experimental Squadron, suspecting that he would need someone with experience of using the new weapons, after the Battle of Earth. His former Flag Captain had taken to the role like a duck to water. "The ship is completely automated, of course, so no damage control teams, but the download suggests that the damage was mainly centred to the starboard drive nodes and shield generators."

"But it can no longer project starboard shields," Salgak rasped. The Geek wore a standard cowl, half-hiding his face, but it failed to hide the cyborg implants that tore and mutilated at his flesh. He might have been handsome once — Colin would not have cared to swear to it, or anything else regarding the Geeks — but he had given it up to seek union with computers and other devices. The Empire had regarded them as a dangerous menace and, even now, few people could look on them without feeling repulsed. Most implants, the handful that had been legal, were hidden beneath the skin, but the Geeks gloried in their difference from the human norm. "A second strike, even without the shield-busting missiles, would complete the destruction of the ship."

David nodded in agreement. "Any rational Captain, assuming that he survived, would be trying to surrender or flicker out," he said. It was, Colin knew, a moot point. The remains of the superdreadnaught's flicker drive had been pulled out to help repair two others that had been captured at Gaul. The computers running the ship couldn't have flickered out if their lives depended on it. "Should we send in the second flight?"

"Why not?" Salgak rasped. "Let us complete the destruction of an ugly ship."

Colin didn't, quite, roll his eyes. The Geeks produced the most remarkable ships in the Empire, including the powerful *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts that had fought at Earth, but they had their own sense of aesthetics. The Empire, by contrast, tended towards the

brute force approach. There was little subtle in a *General*-class superdreadnaught and they wanted the universe to know it. There was little point in modelling the starfighters as if they had to fly through atmospheres using old-style jet engines, rather than simply using drive fields, but they'd insisted and, as they were doing the construction work, had won the argument. The starfighters, he had to admit, looked rather spectacular.

It was the missiles that made them deadly, however, and they were another Geek invention. The shield-buster missiles simply couldn't be fired from standard range, which meant that they had to be deployed from very close to the target ship, too close for any hope of survival. The Second Battle of Harmony had featured gunboats, flickering into extremely-close range to launch the missiles, but the concept hadn't been a success. The entire gunboat force had been wiped out. They were too large to dodge easily and too small to be heavily shielded… although that, too, was a moot point so close to a superdreadnaught's fission beams. The starfighters, on the other hand…

He watched, grimly, as Blue Squadron leapt to the attack, closing in rapidly on the stricken superdreadnaught. The target ship's point defence had been badly weakened by the first strikes and it couldn't turn fast enough to prevent them from heading right towards the damaged sectors. The starfighters were tiny, small enough to accelerate to their full speed almost instantly… and no lumbering superdreadnaught could match them. One by one, they unleashed their warheads, exploding deep within the superdreadnaught's hull… and the superdreadnaught blew apart in a blinding flash.

"Direct hit," someone carolled over the communication channels. "Scratch one flattop!"

"Target destroyed," Salgak said, dispassionately. "All starfighters are returning to base."

Colin frowned. "Scratch one flattop?"

David had the grace to look a little embarrassed. "No one has used starfighters or anything like them for centuries," he said. "The concept simply wasn't workable before now. We had to look back to the pre-spaceflight days for anything remotely comparable and… well, the pilots fell in love with some of the old movie characters."

"I see," Colin said. Truthfully, he found it more amusing than annoying. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

"There have been thousands of applicants to be pilots," David said, as they watched the starfighters returning to their base ship. "We started with people who had had experience with small craft — shuttle pilots and the like — but not all of them made the transition successfully. Marine landing craft pilots and assault shuttle pilots did

the best, although we still had a series of accidents until we got a proper simulator set up on the *Ark Royal* — that's the refitted bulk freighter we've been using as a carrier."

He shrugged. "Overall, the concept is definitely workable," he concluded. "We can start mass production as soon as the shipyards are ready."

"Which will not be for months," Salgak rasped, looking up at them. A thin communications laser shone out of his implants and linked into the vessels computers. "We underestimated the Empire's ability to screw up their facilities… and, of course, the suicide attack on the Jupiter shipyards didn't help. Hundreds of facilities will have to be refitted before they can produce either *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts or starfighters."

"We're going to need *Generals* and *Admirals*," David said, grimly. They'd clearly had the debate before. The Imperial Navy had been hammered hard during the rebellion and was barely a shadow of its former self. "We need every ship we can get up and running as soon as possible, so never mind perfection…"

Colin scowled. The first thing he'd done, once he'd installed his people in Earth's orbital defences — and therefore ensuring that he could keep a grip on the planet itself — had been to start attempting to track down and account for every Imperial Navy starship that had been in commission when he'd started the rebellion. He hadn't expected a quick result, but the early research had suggested that a depressing number of starships had been destroyed, or had gone renegade, or had simply never existed at all. Corruption had been the lifeblood of the Imperial Navy and it was quite possible — more than merely possible — that several hundred starships, including a number of superdreadnaughts, had been nothing more than entries on the fleet register, while their commanding officers had pocketed the funds allocated for their construction. He'd already had a number of officers removed and arrested for such antics, but he had a nasty feeling that he had barely scratched the surface.

And the rebellion had severely damaged the Empire. Piracy was on the upsurge everywhere, but back in Sector 117, where it had all started. Daria, the Freebooter Queen, as they called her, had brought pirates back into the warm, or had ruthlessly exterminated pirates who had refused to play ball, but her reach had had limits. The confusion that still spread through the Empire meant that the pirates were having a field day raiding at will, while the Imperial Navy could barely provide enough protection. Hell, some of the raiders were former Imperial Navy personnel. David was right, really; they needed more ships, even if they weren't the most modern starships in existence.

“An argument for another time, perhaps,” he said, diplomatically. “Salgak, how many starfighters can you produce within a few months?”

“Maybe a thousand, assuming that we don’t get any more yards here,” Salgak said, after a moment’s thought. “The difficult part will be deploying them anywhere where they will be needed.”

“Here, perhaps,” Colin said, absently. The downside of running the Empire, he had come to discover, was that it was hard to trust his subordinates. He trusted everyone who had served in the Shadow Fleet, but there were Admirals in the Imperial Navy who were far from trustworthy. Ironically, he’d come to realise that if he pushed them too hard, they’d rebel against the Provisional Government. If they managed to get organised as a unit, they’d have enough firepower to retake Earth… and commit the Empire to a second round of civil war. “If we can cut loose a few squadrons of cruisers and destroyers from here, we might be able to make a dent in piracy.”

“Perhaps,” Salgak agreed. The Geek bowed formally. “If you’ll excuse me…”

He departed, his heavy tread echoing in their heads before the bulkhead hatch closed behind him. “Interesting person,” David said, dryly. “There are times when I could almost see the virtue of joining them.”

“The girls wouldn’t be so interested in you if you had a face marred by implants and… *things* that would poke her eye out when she tried to kiss you,” Colin replied, dryly. He had always been able to relax with David, even if he couldn’t relax around anyone else, particularly half of the Provisional Government. The rebellion had once been completely under his control, but now… now, it was so large that he couldn’t handle it all. He’d had to make compromises and some of them worried him badly. He looked back out towards the starfield and scowled. “How is the remainder of the Experimental Squadron coping?”

“Pretty well,” David said, slowly. “There was a lot of dissent about the starfighters at first, but when we started to run proper drills, most of that dried up and became enthusiastic support. The only real question is what we’re going to do with them?”

“Perhaps re-ignite the human race’s progress,” Colin said, after a moment. “The Empire effectively froze progress for centuries, but now we can encourage new businesses and research efforts that will expand the Empire’s tech base and, just incidentally, remove some of the Clans from the equation.” He shrugged. “And we might need them to go to war, David. There’s still the mystery of the four missing superdreadnaught squadrons.”

David nodded. Back during the Battle of Earth, four

superdreadnaught squadrons had deserted Home Fleet and flickered out for parts unknown, without even a parting shot at the rebels. No one had been able to come up with a convincing explanation, but Colin suspected that their commanders intended to carve out an Empire for themselves, somewhere out along the Rim. They might even attempt to seize a sector and turn it into a springboard for retaking Earth. He'd nervously expected to hear news of them every day, but after six months, he was starting to wonder if they'd all flickered out well past the Rim. They could be *anywhere*.

"And how about you personally?" David asked, finally. "It's been four months since I saw you. How are you coping with Government?"

Colin scowled. "Do you remember when I said that we shouldn't scorch Earth?" David nodded. "I was wrong. The entire planet is driving me mad."

David quirked an eyebrow at him. "It's that bad?"

"It's a nightmare," Colin said. "I never realised just how bad it was… and I should have known. There are thousands of competing interests, over *everything*, and somehow I have to cajole, bribe or force them into marching in the same direction. Push one place, half a dozen others protest loudly, press for one policy, discover that the price of support is later support for something you know damn well shouldn't be done."

He sighed. "The Families want to keep as much of their power as possible, but many of their workers have unionised and are demanding better treatment, while the colonies and the first-rank worlds have seized much of their assets in payment for centuries of economic rape. The higher officers of the Imperial Navy hate my guts, not without reason, and think I intend to replace them all…"

"You do," David pointed out. "How many of them are fit to kiss Admiral Percival's ass?"

"There are times when I worry about you," Colin said, wryly. "You're right, I do intend to clean out as many as possible, but they all have patrons. Add in the fact that half of them have friends and allies in the outer sectors, some of them commanding some quite serious firepower… I'm surprised that no one has managed to organise them by now."

"Someone might have done," David pointed out. "Why did you agree to accept Admiral Wachter as CNO?"

"They wanted someone reassuring and I wanted him somewhere I could keep an eye on him," Colin said. "I'm tired, I feel old… and I don't dare take a long break for fear of something breaking. I used to play chess and basketball, but now I don't even dare let myself do that. I've tied myself down to the High City and…"

He shook his head. "And I'm feeling sorry for myself," he

concluded. “When do you hope to have this carrier wing ready for deployment?”

“Give us a few weeks and we’ll have the force ready,” David said. “You do sound as if you need a break. Isn’t there somewhere on Earth you can go for a while, away from any responsibilities?”

“And when I got back, everything would be falling apart and we’d be fighting a second civil war,” Colin said, tiredly. “Give it a couple of years without any major disasters and I might be able to relax, secure in the knowledge that Parliament is in control of the Empire and all possible internal threats have been neutralised.”

“And that’s not going to happen,” David said. “There are always going to be problems.” He paused. “On the other hand… how many problems does Admiral Percival have?”

“None,” Colin said. “He’s dead.”

“And it suits him,” David said. “Now, the pilots are quite eager to meet you, so…”

Colin allowed him to lead him into the wardroom, where the pilots were waiting, and spent the next hour happily chatting to them, despite the differences in their ranks. The Shadow Fleet hadn’t encouraged the exaggerated deference of the Imperial Navy — there had been officers who had demanded a full prostration from their subordinates — and there was a certain air of informality, although there was still a barrier. Colin realised, numbly, that he had grown into his role… and the young pilots were still at the beginnings of their careers. To them, all of the new ways were nothing new.

“Perhaps, afterwards, I’ll obtain a survey ship and go exploring out beyond the Rim,” he said to David, who smiled. “That would be something wonderful.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of a courier boat. “Admiral, we have a message for you,” the communications officer said. Colin skimmed it quickly, cursing under his breath. It had been almost exactly what he had been dreading. “Your presence is required back on Earth.”

Colin scowled. “See what I mean?” He asked, dryly. There would be time to reprimand the communications officer later. It wasn’t generally a good idea to discuss messages in front of everyone, even if it wasn’t a surprise. “David, get the wing worked up as quickly as possible. I think they’re going to be needed.”

The pilots cheered.

Chapter Three

Lord Wakefield was throwing a party and everyone who was anyone was invited.

Kathy Tyler, no longer Lady Kathy, watched from a balcony as the bright young things of the Thousand Families congregated below her. The party, one of hundreds that had been thrown ever since the Fall of Earth, was packed, with thousands of young men and women — and some who looked young, but weren't — buzzing around and trying to pretend that nothing had changed. It was a costume party, which meant that there were all kinds of extraordinary outfits being worn, the more outrageous tickling the fancy of the young even as they shocked the old. Here, in the heart of Wakefield House, it was possible to forget the war.

There were seven young men wearing top hats and black suits, as if they were going to a wedding, dancing with ladies who wore skirts so wide that they had to reach out to their partners and looked to be permanently on the verge of toppling over. There were girls who wore harem outfits, held on by the eyes of every young man and not a few of the young women in the room, and young men wearing what they fondly imagined to be peasant outfits. There were men and women wearing Chinese, Japanese, Russian and even Arab outfits, while trying to outshine the remainder of the room. There was a girl wearing an outfit of shimmering light, held wrapped around her body by a force field that hinted rather than revealed, while her partner wore nothing, but an oversized codpiece. It said, Kathy decided after a moment's thought, something about his insecurities. A penis that size would have caused serious harm to a girl.

Naked pleasure slaves, their dull eyes showing no trace of intelligence or even thought, wandered the room, carrying trays of the finest food and drink from a dozen worlds. The Thousand Families might not have been top dog any more, but no one would have known it from Lord Wakefield's spread. The missing implanted slaves and even a handful of men and women who had survived Imperial Intelligence only to be enslaved by the Lords and Masters of the Empire were the only sign that anything had really changed… and few were sorry to see them go. As far as Kathy knew, no implant had ever lost its control over a slave, but it remained a persistent nightmare.

And besides, they had always given her the creeps.

Colin had, at her strong recommendation, created a whole new series of laws for the Thousand Families. Fathers could no longer have their children altered to fit their specifications. They could no longer

scrabble and fight over pieces of an ever-shrinking pie. They could no longer use their connections and patronage to ensure that the aristocrats who wanted to enter the Imperial Navy rose well beyond the level of their competence. Perhaps, most important of all, the older and larger Families no longer dominated the social scene. Kathy hadn't been surprised by how enthusiastically the younger members of the Families had embraced that particular change. The world of the Thousand Families had always been a dog-eat-dog world…

And she'd chosen to leave it, long ago, to travel to Sector 117 in hopes of earning a new fortune for her Family. Instead, she'd been kidnapped by Jason Cordova, an Imperial Navy renegade and found herself joining the rebellion. She didn't regret it at all, not least because now she was Minister for Industry and all the bright young things whose idea of fun had been to grope her — the Tyler Family had never been very important — had to be polite to her. She hadn't abused the position, much, but it had opened her eyes to the realities of the Empire. Lord Wakefield's grand bash — she dreaded to think how much it had cost him, something she had never thought about before she had left for the Rim — wouldn't change anything. The times were moving on and the Thousand Families would be left behind.

"Not going to be a wallflower all the time, I hope?" A voice said from behind her. "I'm sure that there's at least one person who would want to dance with you."

Kathy turned to see Jason Cordova himself, standing there, holding a pair of drinks in one hand. He wore a pirate's outfit from the sixteenth century, up to and including the black hat with the skull and crossbones logo, but the difference between him and his former peers down below was that he wore flamboyant outfits all the time. When Kathy had first met him, he'd been wearing a golden and purple eyesore that drew all of the attention to the outfit… and away from the man wearing it. They'd been lovers for nearly two years and it still astonished her how much he changed when he undressed. No one would ever have mistaken the faintly patrician man for Jason Cordova… and that was exactly how he liked it.

"I'm just a little bored," she said, as she took one of the drinks. Cordova had been more than a little distracted recently, even if he had been throwing himself into helping Colin cut out as many incompetent or untrustworthy officers from the remainder of the Imperial Navy as possible. "Was I one of those airheads down there five years ago?"

Cordova shrugged. "I was one of them *thirty* years ago, so I'm not in a position to throw stones," he said. "That was just before they packed me off to the Imperial Navy, of course, and sent me out to learn a trade."

Kathy smiled. Jason Cordova was a legend. A young man from the Thousand Families — although no one knew which Family — who had been given command of a starship and ordered to scorch a rebellious world, wiping all life from its surface in a fiery blaze. Cordova had refused to carry out the scorching and had fled to the Rim, barely minutes ahead of a furious Imperial Navy squadron intent on punishing him for refusing to commit mass murder. His crew, all very loyal to him, had followed him into exile and had stayed with him until he'd joined up with the Shadow Fleet and fought in the Battle of Earth.

"And now we've both come home," she said, shaking her head. She hadn't seen as much of him as she had hoped over the last two months. They'd both been awesomely busy. "Why did we even decide to come?"

Cordova looked out over the hordes of bright young things enjoying themselves and trying to pretend that nothing had changed. "I think we both wanted to know if we could still cut back and enjoy ourselves," he said, surprising her with his insight. "I also think that we both found out the answer — no."

Kathy nodded. She had attended too many such balls in her youth. She would have worn something pretty, although she wouldn't have dared to complete with the senior girls, who would have squashed her socially if they had perceived any challenge, and danced and enjoyed herself until her body was aching. Perhaps, afterwards, she would have found a partner for the night and woken up in his bed, wondering what had happened to her clothes. She hated to think, now, how much her dresses and outfits had cost her father…

"We've grown up," she agreed, and finished her drink. It was one of Lord Wakefield's private concoctions, a pink fizzer or something like that, and she didn't want to think about what he'd put in it. It was probably highly alcoholic, but she'd taken the precaution of taking a simple counter-agent before she'd disembarked from the aircar and she couldn't get drunk. The most that could happen was that she would become a little tipsy. "Let's go somewhere else."

He allowed her to lead him through the chattering throngs, including a handful who called out to her, hoping to get into her good graces or pretending to be in her good graces. The High City worked, or had worked, on a system of patronage, where who you knew was more important than how good you were, but times had changed. She might not have the satisfaction of forcing self-important men and women to court her, repeatedly, but at least she wasn't having to put up with their flawed products. Minister of Industry, it seemed, was a job with a very high turnover. The person who'd remained in the job the longest had been there for two years.

The outer hall was still bustling with guests arriving from other mansions. Someone, she saw, had vandalised an old painting with the words LONG LIVE THE EMPRESS, although two pleasure slaves were trying valiantly to remove the writing without damaging the priceless artwork. A pair of young men, barely entering their teens, were groping the slaves in public, laughing and giggling to one another. The slaves weren't human — the production line that had created them saw to that — but it still bothered her. The Rim had had few moral principles, but she'd never seen anything like the casual creation of near-human slaves…

On the other hand, she thought morbidly, *there's rape and murder and endless struggles, out there far from the light of the Empire. Perhaps we're not that different after all.*

Cordova looked over at her after he'd helped her into the aircar. "How was your father?"

Kathy considered. She hadn't visited her father at first, not after she'd read her own obituary. Her Family had been nice about her, although her father had been crushed at losing not only his daughter and Heir, but some of his dreams. Others hadn't been so nice, with 'nice piece of ass' right next to 'cock-tease,' all from younger men who resented her reluctance to go to bed with them just because they were senior to her, socially. Stacy Roosevelt had been surprisingly harsh, not least because she should have known that Kathy was actually still alive, instead of being kidnapped, raped and held for ransom by a pirate band. Colin had looked hard for Stacy after discovering that she was still on Earth, but she'd vanished, probably somewhere where she thought that nothing had changed.

"He wanted to see what I could do to rebuild the Family fortune," she said, finally. "After Roosevelt crashed and burnt" — Stacy styled herself the Roosevelt now, something that the remainder of the Family hadn't opposed, not least because it made her responsible for their debts — "my Family went down with them. He was hoping that I might ensure that they got some good contracts to rebuild themselves."

She shook her head. "I don't think I'll be going back there," she added. "It just makes me look as bad as the last set of procurement officers."

"Good," Cordova said, deadpan. "Cordova's wife must be above suspicion."

Kathy elbowed him. "Twit," she said. It was tempting to think that they might have a happy life together, one day, but for the moment their duties kept them apart. "And you? Have you thought about going back to your Family?"

Cordova looked uncomfortable. "They cut me out of the Family

Tree," he said, grimly. Kathy was about the only person who would have heard the pain under his sense that it was a vast joke. "I doubt they want to see me again, particularly now, not after I've helped take them down a peg or two. It would be nice to go up to them and say, *look, here I am. Your prodigal son, come home. Kiss my hairy ass*!" He laughed. "Yeah, it would be nice, until I started having to deal with the Family again."

He shook his head. "Better, I think, to remain Jason Cordova and let sleeping tigers lie," he finished. "I wasn't born Jason Cordova, you know."

Kathy shrugged as the aircar passed over the mountains and altered course, ghosting down at supersonic speed towards the High City. Earth's population, even now, was barely over three million, mostly members of the Thousand Families and their clients. The darkness surrounding the aircar was unbroken by lights, or any sign of human habitation, allowing the stars to shine down freely on the planet below. She could look up and see the halo of asteroids and industrial modules orbiting the planet and, beyond them, the lights of orbital fortresses and starships, protecting the new order from its enemies. She'd joked, years ago, that if Earth were to be scorched, the Empire would run a lot smoother and have more money, but the joke didn't seem so funny now. The Provisional Government had enemies. The odds were that Kathy, Colin and the rest of them were the most hated people on the planet.

She must have fallen asleep, for the next thing she felt was Cordova carrying her gently into the small townhouse she'd turned into her centre of operations and residence, while she was on Earth. She'd found herself dividing her time between Earth, Mars, Jupiter and AlphaCent, where massive shipyards circled the star and struggled to keep up with the new demand for starships. The Empire's new construction program, intended to out-produce the Geeks and Nerds, had barely begun when the war ended, leaving Kathy to pick up the pieces. She'd been utterly ruthless, sacking managers who failed to deliver the goods, or abused their workforce, but it was like trying to bail out a river with a bucket and spade. The workers wanted rights, the managers wanted job security, the construction facilities were falling to pieces because no one had bothered to repair them… it was a nightmare. Only Colin's backing and that of the Cicero Family had managed to keep the Empire moving, but there was an insatiable demand for new starships… and she couldn't meet them all.

"You looked cute like that," Cordova said, later. He'd carried her into bed and put her between the sheets as gently as a mother with her child. Kathy was rather amused that he had joined her without bothering to get undressed. "How are you feeling this morning?"

“Surprisingly refreshed,” Kathy said, as she pulled herself out of bed, tore away the remains of her outfit, and staggered into the shower. “Are you coming to join me, then?”

Afterwards, they breakfasted on the balcony, looking out over the High City. Kathy had refused, on a matter of principle, to hire any servants, although she was technically entitled to hundreds of assistants. It was hard enough finding competent and trustworthy people to man her offices in the High City, let alone finding someone to keep her apartment in order, and so she tended to either make her own breakfast or eat in one of the office dining rooms. Cordova didn’t complain about her cooking — she rather enjoyed cooking, although she would never have admitted it to her family — and it provided a nice opportunity to be together. She knew that she should check her terminal, knowing that there would be hundreds of messages for her to wade through, but she couldn’t be bothered. In her experience, nine messages out of ten could wait, or could be passed on to a subordinate.

“I’m surprised you didn’t take the 5th Squadron when Colin offered it to you,” she said, finally, having exhausted all other topics of conversation. “It did need a commanding officer who actually knows what he’s doing.”

“It’s been years since I commanded an Imperial Navy squadron,” Cordova said. “The Volunteer Fleet was much easier, not least because we all knew how far we could go with each other, but they’re now spilt up and helping to move goods from one side of the Empire to the other…”

Kathy nodded grimly. It was another problem. The Thousand Families had been working for years to bring all of the independent shippers under their control, not least because they forced the Family-owned shipping lines to keep their prices down. The early stages of the rebellion had seen thousands of freighters desert the Families and join the Shadow Fleet, serving as its logistics chain, and now that Earth had fallen, the shipping lines were coming apart at the seams. There might have been a few thousand Captains still willing to serve in the shipping lines, in exchange for better treatment and funding, but the vast majority preferred to work for themselves. The net result was that the shipping lanes were either crowded or almost deserted, hammering away at the economic links that bound the Empire together. The upsurge in piracy didn’t help. The Imperial Navy was running around, trying to establish a convoy system, but merchant skippers didn’t like running in convoys and preferred to trust their luck. It wasn’t a winning move.

“And besides, not all of the spit and polish brigade trust me,” Cordova added. “They’ve seen enough pirate ships to think that the

Random Numbers would have been the same, so…"

He shrugged. "And besides, I'm more use here," he concluded. He gave her a wink that would have had him jailed on some of the more repressive planets. "You're here, after all."

Kathy smiled, almost sadly. She knew, deep inside, that as far as Cordova was concerned, she was just a mistress. Space was his one true love and he couldn't bear to be parted from her for long. One day, he would take his cruiser and set off to travel the depths of space again, leaving her behind. She didn't hold it against him. She'd been the same herself once.

Her terminal buzzed before she could speak. "It's probably someone with a hangnail," she said, opening the small black unit and scanning the message when it blinked up in the holographic field. She'd sacked assistants who had sent her urgent messages before about nothing important. "I wonder…"

She scowled. "It's an urgent summons to the Council," she said, finally. "That probably means bad news." She picked up her cup of tea and drank it quickly. "Coming?"

Chapter Four

The High City, Colin had realised when he'd first set eyes upon it, had been created by someone without any sense of taste or aesthetics. It was a curious mixture of styles, ranging from Ancient Greek and Roman styles to more modern styles, some of them looking like purely imaginary spacecraft, half-buried in the ground. It was huge and yet barely populated, covering over a hundred square miles of ground, inhabited only by the Thousand Families and their servants. The servants, of course, didn't get to live in the mansions. *They* had to sleep in the barracks surrounding the city.

It was traditional for all weapons and defensive precautions to be kept out of the High City, but Colin had appointed a Marine Regiment to handle the security precautions, suspecting that the more standard Household Troops or Family security personnel would have divided loyalties if he kept them in the High City. It's population had swelled over the last few months, from representatives from the outer sectors and reporters from the first-rank worlds coming to see the High City for the first time, to Colin's people running the government and it had created a whole new security nightmare. No one knew, yet, who had murdered Lord Roosevelt — although Colin wasn't going to waste time mourning him — and the members of the Provisional Government were very definitely targets. Colin himself had been the target of over a hundred assassination attempts, while Cordova and Kathy had each been targeted on multiple occasions. The handful of captured assassins had been executed, *pour encorager les autres*, but they hadn't talked. Someone with access to really high tech and a complete lack of scruples had made tracing them back to their backers impossible. It was, Colin had decided, rather worrying.

It was also traditional for shuttle over-flights to be banned, on the grounds that it upset the high-ranking and influential citizens of the High City, but Colin had overturned that particular rule, on the grounds that he and his people needed to travel around the Solar System as quickly as possible. It hadn't made them any more popular, he reflected, as the shuttle settled down towards the Parliament building. The odds were that not a few Family Dowagers were seriously considering installing antiaircraft weapons on their lawns.

No one had taken Parliament seriously for centuries. According to unbiased history accounts, or at least as close to unbiased accounts as possible in the Empire, the original Families had struck a deal with the first-rank worlds, under the rule of Emperor Angus, that Parliament would serve as a check on their ambitions. Angus might have genuinely intended it to serve as a democratic block on their abuse of

power, but he'd been assassinated and Parliament had become little more than a talking shop. The MPs had learned to keep their heads down, accept the vast bribes that came with their positions, and never think of thinking for themselves at all. The handful that seemed to actually believe all the high-minded propaganda Public Information pumped out about how Parliament made all the real decisions were quickly disposed of by Imperial Intelligence, or turned into puppets, just to keep the rest voting as their patrons ordered them to vote. The Battle of Earth had led, inevitably, to the collapse of Parliament. Colin and Kathy had swept them all out of office, sent the most corrupt and unpleasant to penal worlds, and sent out a call for honest and fair elections that would create a new Parliament. This time, with Colin and his people in control of the planetary defences, Parliament would have real teeth.

Their building was a short brown oblong, standing out from the remainder of the High City by how dingy and used it looked. It was an appearance he suspected to have been deliberately designed to make the point as clearly as possible. There should have been, in theory, two thousand MPs within the building, but there were barely five hundred elected under the new rules, each one trying to feel out their place in the grand scheme of things. The Empire, outside the first-rank worlds and Macore, had had very little experience with democracy and it showed.

The shuttle came down on the lawn in front of the Parliament Building and a team of armed Marines surrounded it. Colin had been embarrassed, at first, to have such a reception, but he'd changed his mind after the first assassination attempt. As he disembarked from the shuttle, the lead Marine ran a scanner over his body, checking his identity against the central database and ensuring that he wasn't carrying anything dangerous, beyond the pistol he wore on his belt. In an Empire where an unsuspecting dupe could carry a bomb, or worse, into the heart of power, such precautions were necessary, even if Colin himself hated them. He would have hated, he had to admit, being dead more. The Marines escorted him into the building and into the general conference room.

"Welcome back," Daria said, as he entered. "I was starting to wonder if you wouldn't make it."

Colin smiled tiredly. Daria somehow managed to keep looking as young and pretty as ever, despite being something over fifty years old — her real age was a mystery, even to him — while he had a sneaking suspicion he looked rather like a tired and haggard man. She could have passed for twenty-one, her body growing into womanhood, but her eyes showed her real age. She was one of the sharpest people he'd met, with a brain like a razor. She had, somehow, managed to

forge the Freebooters into a legitimate political force. He had to admire her for that, if nothing else.

He glanced around the remainder of the table and smiled, tiredly. The room hadn't been decorated in the classic Imperial style, for which he was silently grateful. It was bare and functional, but little else. He'd had new terminals, computers and security systems installed, but his only other concession to comfort had been a small drinks cabinet. He had intended the room to be functional and businesslike. It was almost a shame that he couldn't start pushing matters onto Parliament, but they weren't ready. He could barely keep the Empire together himself.

"We have had something of a development," he said, finally. "I will allow Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter to brief you."

That was another compromise, one that he wasn't entirely comfortable with. Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter had been about the only senior officer who'd fought on the other side to come out of it with an intact, and even enhanced, reputation. Given nothing, but his own ingenuity, Joshua had given the Shadow Fleet a bloody nose and its first significant defeat. If the Thousand Families had backed him to the hilt, instead of sticking a metaphorical knife in his back, the war would have gone the other way. Colin still had nightmares about the moment when his ships had been — apparently — locked out of flicker-space with a wall of missiles bearing down on their positions.

And politics had dictated that Joshua be given a place in the Provisional Government.

"We received a dispatch boat from Hawthorn four hours ago," Joshua said, in his dry voice. He could be inspirational or businesslike, as he chose. "The ship was dispatched as soon as the *Caidin* returned to Hawthorn, reporting that Cottbus is apparently in rebellion against the Empire."

Colin winced. Cottbus was the third major industrial hub in the Empire… and the only one outside the Inner Worlds. The Hohenzollern Family had developed it in conjunction with several other Clans in hopes of breaking the Cicero stranglehold on starship construction, including superdreadnaughts. Cottbus had one of the three Type-I Shipyards… and the ability, he presumed, to expand the shipyards to produce more superdreadnaughts. The world hadn't been a dynamo of research and development — very few worlds, under the Empire, had carried out advanced research and development — but it should have had promise. It was one of the reasons why he had devoted so much effort to securing it.

"The report is fairly simple," Joshua continued. "The cruisers were ordered to dock at the command fortress, but the CO decided to leave one of the cruisers out of the gravity shadow, just in case of

trouble. The command fortress opened fire as soon as the cruisers entered close engagement range and all eight were destroyed. The *Caidin* was very lucky to evade a pair of battlecruisers, but it flickered out and was able to return to Hawthorn. It downloaded a full report to us, but unfortunately we have very little data beyond the basic sensor data."

He paused. "The evidence strongly suggests that Cottbus intends to be in rebellion against the Empire," he concluded. "The sensors suggested that the fleet elements seen within the system were all refitted and ready for battle. I suspect that we must consider the entire sector, perhaps including the surrounding sectors, to be under hostile control."

Colin scowled as the strategic display appeared in front of them, showing known and suspected dispositions for the Imperial Navy. Cottbus was far enough from Earth to have some degree of effective independence — the Hohenzollern Family or Clan could have been up to anything there, up to and including building superdreadnaughts for placing one of their own people on the throne — and it would be weeks, at least, before they could get a major fleet out to Hawthorn, let alone launch a probing attack on Cottbus itself. In a very real sense, they now faced the same problem the Empire had faced when he'd started the rebellion… and the Empire had lost. It was a bad precedent.

"That leads us to a simple question," Lord Tiberius Cicero said. "Who is behind this… sudden burst of rebelliousness?"

"Unknown as yet," Joshua replied, evenly. Colin's scowl deepened. He had had little choice, but to co-opt the Cicero for the Council, although it was something else that worried him. Joshua was an experienced naval officer who was loyal to the Empire as a force for the benefit of humanity. The Cicero was the Head of his Family and someone who stood to lose, literally, everything if the reform process went too far. He didn't trust Tiberius, even though he admired the bravery of a man who'd travelled alone to the enemy's flagship to talk peace, but without him, he dreaded to think what sort of economic chaos would be unleashed. The entire mess was quite bad enough already.

"There are several Admirals in that sector, almost directly opposite Macore and Morrison, who will have suspected that they were on the shit list," Cordova said, from his position. Cordova was someone else who couldn't be trusted completely, although there had been no sign of any treachery on his part. If nothing else, no one else would have him. "They're not really wrong, either. I suspect that several of them have managed to get together as a unit and start preparing a counter-attack against us."

“And given enough time,” Kathy added, from her position, “they can use Cottbus to build up their own forces and wreck huge damage on our positions.”

“So we don’t give them the time,” Daria said, flatly. Her green eyes went very cold and hard. “They think that we can’t deal with them in time. We have to move, now, to prevent them from counter-attacking.”

The argument went backwards and forwards for several minutes, while Colin listened carefully, keeping his own counsel. Daria was right, in a sense, but the Imperial Navy was overstretched. It was hard enough maintaining enough superdreadnaughts to cover all of the critical targets, while there were never enough smaller craft to provide convoy escorts and protection for interstellar freight. Hundreds of worlds were in a serious state, knocked back hundreds of years in development, and he couldn’t help them all. He could barely keep the economy going.

Worse, because the positions *were* reversed, he had to worry about covering worlds that would not, normally, have been considered suitable targets. The first-rank worlds were scrambling to expand their defence forces as fast as possible, including their first-ever superdreadnaughts, but they wouldn’t be able to protect themselves for long, unless the Imperial Navy came to their aid. That was bad enough… but then there were the second-rank worlds, the third-rank worlds…

This isn’t going to be solved easily, he thought, grimly.

He tapped the table for attention. “So far, most of this is just speculation,” he said. “We don’t know exactly what happened at Cottbus and we won’t until we get some answers. Joshua, how many ships can Cottbus reasonably expect to have?”

Joshua looked up at Captain Penelope — Penny — Quick, his former Flag Captain and current aide. She’d been offered a command of her own in the wake of the Battle of Earth, but she’d chosen to stay with Joshua instead, working for him directly. It was an odd choice to outsiders, but Colin was fairly sure that she was in love with her superior, technically in breech of the new regulations. He hadn’t been able to determine if they were sleeping together, but if they were, he’d already decided to ignore it.

“Admiral Wilhelm was apparently assigned the standard three squadrons of superdreadnaughts, as well as upwards of two hundred smaller starships that were assigned to his sector,” she said, consulting her terminal. “One of the squadrons was supposed to have been dispatched to Earth in the wake of Second Morrison to reinforce Home Fleet, but apparently never arrived. Assuming that the two nearest sectors are also involved, they may have seven squadrons of

superdreadnaughts and over a thousand escorts."

She paused. "Only a handful of ships deserted from that sector and made it to the Shadow Fleet," she added. "As far as I can tell, Admiral Wilhelm was allowed to turn it into a private fiefdom by the Hohenzollern Clan, who apparently patronised the Admiral and most of his senior officers. Imperial Intelligence apparently believed that the Admiral was definitely building up a force that was loyal and indeed devoted to him, but they were not allowed to take any action against him."

"Friends in high places," Joshua said. Colin could hear a trace of bitterness in his voice. Joshua had been sacked for being too competent for his post, while incompetents like Admiral Percival and Admiral D'Ammassa had been allowed to continue to hold their posts. Some had been merely incompetent. Others had been deeply corrupt. "The entire Hohenzollern Clan must have been behind him if he was that blatant about it."

Colin nodded slowly. "Do you know him? Does anyone know him?"

"I served under him once as a Midshipman," Cordova said, unexpectedly. "He was a Commodore at the time, very intent on pressing the flesh with as many members of the Thousand Families as possible. He did very well on exercises, but I doubt that he ever played an unplanned exercise or anything else along those lines."

"He was supposed to be competent," Joshua added. He shook his head slowly. "I looked up his records, but there was little beyond the standard fudge. They make him sound like the reincarnation of Admiral Carpathia."

"In other words, a serious problem," Colin said. His own records had been carefully written by Admiral Percival to blow his career out of the water and leave him stranded permanently as first officer of the battlecruiser *Lightning*. Percival, wherever his soul had ended up, had to be choking on that irony. Colin had seized control of the battlecruiser and used it to start the rebellion. Had it really only been two years ago? "It's not something we can allow to pass."

He silently canvassed opinion before moving on. "I suggest that we assemble a task force at once to head to Cottbus and demand explanations," he said. "The commander will have authority to negotiate on our behalf, but only on terms acceptable to us, such as the planet and sector remaining within the Empire. If we have to, we'll amnesty Wilhelm and his compatriots if they agree to surrender without further bloodshed."

It didn't sit well with him — he would have preferred to punish Wilhelm or whoever was in charge for destroying his ships and killing his people — but there was little choice. If Cottbus could be secured

without further loss of life, he would accept that as the price for success.

"And if they don't?" Daria asked. "What do we do then?"

"We cannot allow them to become a running sore," Colin said. "We move in, fast and hard, and take the worlds back by force."

He paused. "Is there any other business?"

"A detail, yes," René Goscinny, Minister for Foreign Affairs, said. He'd been appointed as the first-rank worlds representative to the Provisional Government, a role he was uniquely suited to carrying out. He'd been Gaul's foreign minister before the Battle of Gaul had broken, once and for all, the taboos surrounding the first-rank worlds. "Do I understand that you intend to proceed with the withdrawal from the alien homeworlds?"

Colin nodded. "There's little point in keeping the garrisons on their surface, particularly now," he said, firmly. Humanity had caused the extinction of two alien species, one deliberately, one accidentally — although there were still some dire suspicions — and he was determined that there wouldn't be a third. They'd been held under the Empire's iron boot for too long. "I believe that we can grant them autonomy without further ado."

"It will not be popular," Goscinny said, firmly. "I suggest that we leave it until…"

"Until when?" Colin asked. The racism within the Empire against non-human races had been a null-issue to him… until he'd come face-to-face with some of the consequences. He'd sworn to end it and he meant it. "It will never be popular, but it has to be done. The sooner, the better."

Goscinny winced. "And no popular vote?"

Colin shrugged. "Does history record a case where the majority was actually right?"

Chapter Five

"And thank God that that's over!"

Admiral Katy Garland looked up as Colin entered, watching as he pulled his uniform jacket off and draped it over a chair, before taking a position facing her. She'd been surprised to be called back to the High City so quickly — it had been weeks since she'd been assigned to escort convoys from Earth to several first-rank worlds — but truthfully she was surprised to have been promoted at all. She had been the senior officer of the Shadow Fleet to be taken prisoner at First Morrison.

"Bad night at the office?" She asked, dryly. She'd known Colin when he'd been a mere Commander and, even though he was now effectively the ruler of the Empire, she found it hard to scrape and bow. If she knew Colin, and she did, he would have hated such deference from an old friend.

"They've invented new ways to square the circle and make two plus two equal five," Colin said, rolling his eyes. An orderly brought him a large mug of coffee — of a brand that, prior to the Fall of Earth, had only been available to the Thousand Families — and he sipped it gratefully. Katy, who'd tried every kind of coffee in the Empire, privately found it a little bitter. "Half of them think that they shouldn't be paying taxes and tithes now and the other half want the first lot to pay more. Sorting out who owes what isn't going to be easy and now…"

He shook his head. "That's an issue for another time," he said. "How determined are you to keep the *Havoc*?"

Katy blinked. The *Havoc*, technically the *Havoc-II*, as the first *Havoc* had been crippled and scrapped at First Morrison, was her flagship, an *Invincible*-class battlecruiser. It was an older ship than the newer Geek-built starships, but it had been refitted just after the Fall of Earth and she'd been assigned it as her flagship. It wasn't quite the same as having sole command of such a glorious starship, but it was as close as she would come to command, ever. Even without the stigma of being captured, she was too high-ranking to command again.

"Very determined," she said. An Admiral should command from a superdreadnaught, according to the Great God Tradition. The Imperial Navy had existed for over a thousand years and nothing as minor as a rebellion and the universe turned upside down would change its habits in a hurry. She'd fought tooth and nail to keep the *Havoc* as her flagship and only Colin's intervention had convinced the Navy Board to allow her to have her way. "I thought that Joshua had agreed not

to press the issue?"

Colin shrugged. Katy could see their point, at times, but she didn't care. A battlecruiser depended more on speed than firepower and armour. Salvos that a superdreadnaught could laugh off would blow it into flaming plasma, but she had always detested the ponderous superdreadnaughts. A superdreadnaught might have been safer for an Admiral, by far, but she disliked that logic. An Admiral should share the risks with her officers and men.

"We have a problem out towards Cottbus," Colin said, and rapidly outlined the situation. "We don't know exactly what's going on out there, or just what Admiral Wilhelm is playing at, or who's playing with him… but we suspect that it's not going to be good. At best, he's posturing to get better treatment, but it's already cost us several hundred lives and I'm not laughing."

He leaned forward. "I want you to take command of a task force I'm dispatching to Hawthorn and deal with the problem," he continued. "I trust that you can command three squadrons of superdreadnaughts from the *Havoc* without much difficulty?"

Katy scowled. He had, perhaps intentionally, placed her in a blind. If she continued to command from a lowly battlecruiser the odds were that the enemy wouldn't realise and would concentrate all their firepower on the superdreadnaughts. The *Havoc* simply didn't carry enough firepower to be noticeable when superdreadnaughts clashed in the night. If she moved her flag to a superdreadnaught, she might never be able to return to a battlecruiser. It was a problem that would require some thought.

"It should be possible, assuming that it's a well-drilled force," she said, carefully. She picked up a terminal and ran through the limited information on Cottbus and the Sector Fleet assigned to Admiral Wilhelm. "Only three squadrons of superdreadnaughts?"

"They're all new *Independence*-class ships," Colin said. He didn't miss the gleam in her eye. The *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts had been built by the Geeks and had nearly twice the effective firepower of a *General*-class superdreadnaught, a missile-armed brute. Nine of them could take on eighteen *Generals* with a fair chance of coming out ahead. "I'm going to detach several squadrons of escorting starships and at least two squadrons of the latest arsenal ships as well, just to add to your firepower. You're going to be fairly weak in the supporting elements, I'm afraid, but we can't spare you anything else at the moment unless we get another Tenaha."

"I see," Katy said. The Tenaha Sector had thrown its lot in with the new order and the Provisional Government as soon as Earth fell to the Shadow Fleet. They hadn't had a large arsenal of capital ships, but they'd had several squadrons of escorting ships, which had promptly

been added to the Imperial Navy's roster. The sheer magnitude of the problem, however, seemed to defy easy solutions. "I take it that there's no sign of relief on the horizon?"

Colin shook his head. "The first-rank worlds have assigned several of their squadrons to the general pool of escort vessels, but they're concentrating on trying to acquire superdreadnaughts now, so their production of smaller ships is actually being hampered because experienced personnel are being assigned to the larger ships," he said. "The Geeks are doing what they can, but we need to build up a hard core of superdreadnaughts ourselves before someone on the Rim starts trying to cause trouble…"

"Which might have just begun," Katy injected.

"Exactly," Colin said. "Oh, the good news is that we're killing pirates every time we encounter them, but there are so many that it's only a drop in the bucket. We just don't have enough ships to escort every convoy and every time we delay a convoy — when we *can* delay a convoy — it has an effect on the local economic situation."

He shook his head. "I doubt that we'll have many starving worlds," he added, "but there are enough worlds on the edge that the slightest disaster might tip them over into civil war and mass unrest."

Katy followed his logic and winced. The Empire, to give it due credit, had insisted on every newly-settled world becoming capable of feeding itself as fast as possible, avoiding some of the disasters that had plagued early colonisation efforts. The problem was that not every world, particularly the later ones, lived up to that promise… and they didn't always have the infrastructure to repair damaged components or farming units. The Empire had exploited that problem ruthlessly — she remembered the Annual Fleet, which the Shadow Fleet had captured in its first raid on the Empire — and as long as the Empire had been in existence, it had worked fine. Now… the entire system was falling apart and billions of lives were at risk.

"I see," she said, finally. It made her wonder if Colin ever regretted having started the rebellion. "How does this all play into the tax situation?"

Colin smiled, humourlessly. "They want protection in exchange for their taxes, but we need the taxes in order to build them the ships to protect them, but because we're not protecting them they're trying to invest elsewhere, such as in their own shipyards…"

He allowed his voice to trail off. "The bottom line, Katy, is that we need to squash this problem with Admiral Wilhelm as quickly as possible," he concluded. "That's why we're sending you out there."

An image of the Empire's sectors appeared in front of him. "You'll be several weeks from Earth, even assuming we manage to keep that section of the ICN up and running, so I'll expect you to use your own

judgement," he said. "Take the fleet to Hawthorn, scout the Cottbus region and find out what's going on. If you find that you don't have the firepower to take him out, stay back, conduct a tactical survey of the sector and wait for reinforcements."

"In other words, a return to raiding," Katy said, wryly. Colin nodded cynically. The Shadow Fleet had raided worlds on the long march towards Morrison, if only to unsettle the Thousand Families and force them to spread their forces thin, but it had barely worked. Admiral Wachter had been too canny to fool that easily. "Do you want me to take out his shipyard?"

"If you can capture it, Kathy will be delighted," Colin said. Katy had to smile. She liked Kathy Tyler, even though she could be far too enthusiastic half the time. "If not, then take it out and hamper his plans to build up a new navy. If we can't have it, we can't let him use it."

"Yes, sir," Katy said. She stood up. "Am I to assume that there's a time limit?"

"Admiral Wachter is issuing orders for the new squadrons to form up at Jupiter," Colin said. "Once you get there, make a quick analysis and decide how quickly you can flicker out."

"I'm going to run through at least one combat drill first," Katy said, firmly. The Shadow Fleet had had a higher rating for drilling than the old Imperial Navy — the new one, which Colin and Joshua had been founding, took drilling very seriously — but the crew might well be untested. "Once that's completed, I'll let you know when we can depart."

"Of course," Colin said. He stuck out a hand. "May God go with you."

* * *

The only title that Major Vincent Anderson had allowed himself was Security Officer, a title that had a rather dark history within the Imperial Navy. An old-style Security Officer was required to watch the crew of their starship for any signs of disloyalty, subversion or dissatisfaction, and, once they had confirmed a possible suspect, to carry out a rigorous interrogation. The crewman, once they had been though the interrogation, would probably be blacklisted for life, even if they had been innocent. It hadn't been a career that Anderson had enjoyed and, when he'd realised the scope of Colin's conspiracy against the Empire, he had chosen to join it rather than expose it. It was something that would have earned him a death sentence, if he'd been caught deliberately failing in his duty, but as he'd remarked to

Colin at the time, the Empire would have been hard-pressed to decide on which charge they were actually going to shoot him.

And, much to his private surprise, the rebellion had won.

Anderson had refused promotion, choosing to remain as Colin's spymaster and security expert. Colin, he'd decided long ago, was the key figure of the rebellion and the Provisional Government. Without his authority and status, the Provisional Government would fall apart, leaving the old order poised to recover its power and position. He'd ensured that the High City was packed with his spies and surveillance devices, using them to identify several plotters against the Provisional Government, and he'd adopted a pro-active attitude towards them. It was astonishing how incompetent some of the would-be bombers had been. They'd managed to blow themselves up with their own explosives.

But the High City was a security nightmare. There hadn't been an overall security network since the Empress had been disposed, forcing him to work hard to establish a blanket network, one he knew had far too many holes. Even the smallest and least-influential of the Thousand Families had a security staff, who swept their apartments daily for bugs, while the more powerful ones had their own intelligence networks. The nightmare haunted him daily. While he tracked down incompetents, or people who talked too much at the wrong places, what might the competent ones be doing?

He tapped on the door and waited until it opened, allowing him to step into Colin's apartment. Someone like Colin could have had almost any apartment in the city just for the asking, but he'd chosen a small office near the Parliament Building, which at least had the virtue of being easy to guard. The Marines had put everyone, including Anderson, who wanted to enter through a proper security check, ensuring that no obvious threat could get through and threaten Colin. Anderson wasn't reassured. Someone who *really* wanted to get rid of Colin could smuggle a fusion bomb into the city, or, for that matter, an antimatter bomb onto the planet. He didn't even want to *think* about how many of Colin's enemies might have access to shipkiller missiles…

"Vincent," Colin called, from his chair. He looked, Anderson noted, as if he hadn't been sleeping again. Anderson didn't blame him for that. Sleepless nights seemed to be the price for running the Empire. "Any major problems on the horizon?"

Anderson shrugged. The Empire was *vast*, utterly mind-bogglingly vast. He followed politics as closely as anyone else, these days, and he knew just how many possible problems were looming in the future, just under the surface of everyday politics. The real danger, he had already decided, came from the independence movements close to

Earth, starting with Mars. The workers there were already talking about a unilateral declaration of independence…

"Far too many," he said. There were so many possible threats that it was hard to tell which ones were truly serious. "The easiest problem today was we caught another bureaucrat with his hands in the till."

Colin scowled. There was a joke, in the Empire, that the Moon was the planet of bureaucrats. There were, quite literally, millions of bureaucrats on the Moon, charged with actually keeping the Empire running, as inefficient as it was. They might not all be corrupt, but too many of them accepted bribes, or simply stole money from the departmental accounts, just to keep their own livelihoods going. The Empire had once had so much money that they could skim all they liked, but now… now, losing almost anything would be a major problem.

"I take it we have proof?" He asked, finally. "We have images of him taking money?"

"Enough to move to a public trial," Anderson assured him. The Empire had no right to remain silent. Once arrested, the criminal would have his mind read to confirm or disprove his guilt. "I can have him arrested tomorrow and then hold a very public trial, before shooting him down to a penal world on a one-way trip."

"Another one," Colin said. "Why do I feel like the person who was charged with cleaning out a stable?"

"It's been going on for years," Anderson reminded him. "Once this poor bastard is dealt with, we can keep an eye on his friends and see how many of them continue to steal. I'd like to deal with them all, but…"

"Then we'd have to run the place ourselves," Colin said, wryly. The bureaucrats were vitally important to running the Empire, at least until the new order was up and running properly, and they couldn't all be dumped on a penal world. Anderson could only hope that they didn't know that. In five years, or perhaps ten, there would be enough newcomers to change the culture permanently. "Is that the most serious problem?"

"Hardly," Anderson said, and ran through a list of possible problems. "There was one curious little datum that I picked up last week…"

Colin leaned forward. "And that is…?"

"Two people have been spending time together," Anderson said. "Daria and Lord Tiberius Cicero have been meeting, fairly regularly, over the last few weeks."

Colin lifted an eyebrow. "Do you know why?"

"I can't get a bug into the Cicero Residence in the High City," Anderson admitted. The failure gnawed at him, even though he had

learned, rapidly, just how experienced the Thousand Families were at security matters. They had had no choice. Their rivals had seen to that. “All I can tell you is that the shortest time they spent together in private was two hours and the longest time was nine hours. Just what they were discussing…”

“I see,” Colin said, finally. Anderson realised, suddenly, that he hadn’t known until now. It would be nice to believe that it was something innocent, but somehow he had difficulty believing that it was friendship, or even romance. Tiberius, after all, had an engagement now, to a girl called Alicia. “They might have been discussing the shipping crisis.”

“Perhaps,” Anderson said. He had to admit that it was a likely story. The Cicero Clan had been hit badly by the sudden shortage of shippers — after they’d decided to revert to being freelance and join the Freebooters League. “I still don’t like it. They could be discussing anything.”

“I know,” Colin said, “but is that grounds for stopping them?”

Anderson considered it. Imperial Intelligence would have been suspicious of any ‘secret’ conversations and meetings, forcing some commanders to work overtime to ensure that they had invited all the spies to their meetings… or the spies would have told their superiors about the ‘secret’ meetings. Colin, on the other hand, had grounds for paranoia that far exceeded all the Thousand Families, but he was determined not to create a police state. Imperial Intelligence was being brutally reformed. They would not be permitted to waste time while the Provisional Government was reshaping the Empire, let alone influence the outcome and play kingmaker.

“I wish I knew,” he concluded. His instincts were telling him that something was wrong, but he couldn’t take *that* to Colin, could he? “Now, the current state of play regarding the reporters…”

Chapter Six

The Cicero Residence was in the better parts of the High City (of course) and looked as spectacular from the outside as it was luxurious on the inside. It wasn't necessary for the Clan Head to reside within the High City, and aircars ensured that they could assemble in the city at a moment's notice, if they felt the urge, but Tiberius had always liked the Residence. He had fond memories of his early years as a younger son, learning the ropes of high society, while aware that he wouldn't inherit the Headship. It had been a nasty surprise when his father had died, along with his elder brothers, leaving him in line for the succession, but he liked to think that it had given him a certain practical bent. He had had a surprisingly good war.

He'd been the person who had convinced the Thousand Families to seek a truce after the destruction of Home Fleet and the Fall of Earth, offering to trade their political power in exchange for being allowed to keep most of their economic rights. He hadn't expected that it would be accepted — he'd originally suggested offering the truce *before* Home Fleet had been blown to flaming plasma, when the Families still had something to bargain with — but the rebels had agreed to his plan. It had given Tiberius a considerable degree of leverage, which he'd used ruthlessly to ensure that the terms of the agreement were honoured.

Not everyone had agreed. Lady Madeline Hohenzollern, 'Lady' Stacy Roosevelt — who was *the* Roosevelt because no one else wanted the title — Lord Bernadotte, Lord Edison and Lady Mecklinbourgh had all vanished, he suspected some long distance from Earth. Others had remained on the sidelines, watching and waiting to see who came out ahead, while still others refused to believe that anything had changed. Tiberius had found himself respected, but not loved, representing people he suspected were plotting his death. They had already killed his father, years before the rebellion had arisen to shake the very boundaries of the Empire. Now…

He looked over at the woman perched on the edge of her chair. She wore nothing, but a standard shipsuit, with the gold ring of a Captain embroidered on her shoulder. She looked young, about twenty-one years old, with long red hair that reached down her shoulders towards her rear, but he refused to make the mistake of underestimating her. Daria, in her previous incarnation as the Empress Janice, had ruled the Empire for ten years, before she had been finally disposed and forced to flee. Merely surviving, when every man's hand was turned against her, was impressive enough, but she'd built a new power base out along the Rim… and maintained a conspiracy of

friends and allies, including Tiberius's father, on Earth. She'd told him, when they'd first met openly, that her loyalty was to the Empire, but there were times when he wondered. Daria was the strangest person he'd met… and perhaps the most ruthless.

"Is Admiral Wilhelm one of yours?"

Daria shook her head slowly. "No," she said, flatly. Tiberius wished, not for the first time, for more life experience. He'd been too young when he'd become the Clan Head and Daria was old enough, like so many of the other Clan Heads, to be his grandmother. Of course, no one was really sure how old she actually was. He'd accessed her records, very quietly, but almost everything of importance had been scrubbed from the files. That alone bespoke of vast influence. "He's someone who rose to power during my exile."

Tiberius nodded. For the moment, at least, he might as well believe her. "And so… what are we going to do about him?"

Daria shrugged. "Colin intends to follow my advice and crush him before he becomes a serious threat, or a more serious threat," she said, almost as if it was an unimportant issue. "I don't intend to prevent him from carrying out his intentions, if that's what you're asking. Indeed, we don't want more players in the game, do we?"

She smiled, openly. "There are already too many players in the game," she added. "We can afford to watch and wait… for the moment."

"I suppose," Tiberius said, thoughtfully. "And when do we make our move?"

"Patience, young grasshopper," Daria said, mildly. "We've waited for a chance to reform the Empire for so long that we can afford to wait a little longer, can't we? You and I are going to be good servants of the new order until the time comes to reshape it to our specifications, or we're no longer needed."

"If Colin does the work for us," Tiberius added. "Do you think that that's going to happen?"

"The Empire is too large to change quickly," Daria said. "Tell me something. Colin is one person. What makes his grip on power so absolute?"

"The same thing that made you so powerful," Tiberius said. He'd been giving the matter some thought. "Control of Home Fleet and the planetary defences."

"I imagine that the Shadow Fleet would be quite insulted to be referred to as Home Fleet, but you're correct," Daria agreed, mildly. "Colin's control over the system is effectively absolute, even if he is careful not to flaunt that in everyone's face. A conflict between Colin and Admiral Wilhelm, who is apparently an ambitious son of a bitch, is not necessarily to our disadvantage. As long as Wilhelm doesn't

actually win…"

"Colin might be able to punch him out quickly," Tiberius said. His understanding of naval matters was limited — he knew and trusted Admiral Wachter, who was an old family friend, but he had the feeling that approaching Joshua would have been fatal — but he knew how successful the Shadow Fleet had been. "What happens then?"

"I read Admiral Wilhelm's file carefully," Daria said, and Tiberius cursed himself. It was easy to forget that Daria's previous post had been commander of Home Fleet… and that she'd been an experienced Admiral. Reading between the lines would have been easy for her. "He isn't incompetent, even though he was clearly a Hohenzollern client, and shouldn't make any incompetent mistakes like leaving Cottbus open to attack. Unless Colin manages to dig up several additional superdreadnaught squadrons, the war will last at least six months, during which time we will be able to lay the groundwork for our own plans."

She smiled. "And Jason will have to remain on the substitutes bench for a while longer," she added. "I dare say he won't object."

Tiberius winced. He hadn't intended to reveal that particular card, but he'd been determined to impress her… and, clearly, she'd already had an inkling of the truth. The redoubtable and legendary Captain Jason Cordova had been born Jason *Cicero*… and the circumstances of his flight from the Empire had been far murkier than the standard tale. He thought about the hordes of reporters thronging through the High City and scowled. If they had known the truth, they'd be leading the lynch mobs themselves.

"It's chancy," he said, slowly. "What happens if someone else digs up the truth?"

"Your father did an excellent job of hiding it," Daria said. "If someone did manage to send an archaeological team out to the remains of the world… well, they might dig something up, but the Imperial Navy left such a mess that I doubt they will find anything recognisable. I suspect that as long as Cordova remains himself, and continues to act the pirate buffoon to the horror of the grand dames of society, no one will even consider the truth."

Tiberius nodded. He'd accessed the records on the world in question and had been shocked by the sheer level of violence the Imperial Navy had directed at it. The world hadn't just been scorched, but literally pulverised with an antimatter bombardment — taboo under anything, but very special circumstances — and a handful of asteroids, pointed at the planet and allowed to strike the surface. The world was still highly radioactive and utterly unsafe. No one in their right mind would even use it as a penal colony. It would be quicker to shoot the convicts in the head.

“I take your point,” he said, finally. “So, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing, for the moment,” Daria said. “We’re going to watch and wait. The reporters will get enough material without us stirring the pot.”

“Clever,” Tiberius said. “Complete deniability, right?”

He scowled. The Empire had never had a tradition of open reporting. Public Information had decided what the commoners had a right to know and spoon-fed them with lies, distortions and half-truths, while anything reassembling real news was unceremoniously banned. The early reports of the rebellion had been wiped and replaced by a campaign of lies and invective, none of which had prevented word spreading faster than Public Information could counter it. The Empire had never managed to wipe out the messages from the rebellion… and, once Earth had fallen, Colin had closed down Public Information and sacked everyone involved.

The first-rank worlds, by contrast, had had a tradition of investigative journalism and thousands of reporters had descended on Earth to try to dig up scoops and dirt. The Thousand Families hadn’t taken kindly to this at all, but they’d suddenly found themselves without the weapons they’d once used to keep news out of the public domain… and, worse, found themselves the targets of all kinds of reporters. Some, like Kathy Tyler or Tiberius himself, had come out very well. Others had been publicly lambasted, including those who had authorised the scorching of Gaul. The Empire had changed yet again.

“Of course,” Daria said. “I think, however, that we do have a serious problem that we need to counter.”

Tiberius sat up straighter. Daria believed firmly in taking the long-term view of all matters. If she believed that there was a problem that wouldn’t go away on its own, with or without some encouragement, it was serious. Someone who had remained in exile for fifty years, patiently building up a new power base, was someone who couldn’t be treated lightly.

“Aliens,” Daria said, seriously. “You know that Colin intends to remove Imperial garrisons from their worlds?”

Tiberius frowned. “I was under the impression that you introduced him to alien rights,” he said. It was hard to be sure, at such a distance, but he was fairly sure of that report’s accuracy. “Is that a problem now?”

“I encouraged him to think along those lines,” Daria said. She leaned forwards and smiled, almost enchantingly. “Let’s be honest; none of the eight races within the Empire will become a serious threat overnight, even if the garrisons are pulled off their worlds tomorrow.

Two of them don't have any conception of high technology and think that human science is actually magic. Three of them may not even be aware that they're in the Empire at all. God knows, no one has managed to actually talk to them in a sensible manner. That leaves three that have some industry and even some representatives in space, along the Rim, and none of them would pose a problem for a single destroyer. They're not a threat.

"The general public doesn't think in quite the same terms," she continued. "The Empire hammered the threat of aliens into everyone's head for so long that the vast majority of the population is adamantly opposed to giving aliens any rights at all. If the alien worlds were scorched, once and for all, they would cheer. People who hated the Empire for keeping a boot on their necks will see Colin and his people giving aliens a chance to take revenge on humanity. They will not respond well."

She smiled. "And just what do you think that will do for Colin's… reputation?"

"Nothing good," Tiberius said, finally. He wasn't used to thinking in such terms, but he suspected he followed her logic better than some of his peers would have done. Colin's reputation was as a liberator, a man who'd risked everything to destroy the Empire, but now… now, they would see him as threatening the very survival of humanity. "After the Dathi War, no one will want a repeat…"

Daria nodded. The human race's second major alien contact had been traumatic. No one really knew why the Dathi had attacked, but there was little doubt about their objectives; they had intended to exterminate the human race. Decades of fighting later, the Federation Navy had finally broken through the Dathi fleet and fallen upon their worlds. Every last one of them had been scorched down to nothing, but radioactive rubble, dead worlds orbiting uncaring stars. The entire Dathi race had been exterminated. There were rumours, from time to time, of missing Dathi colonies, but mostly they were invented by Public Information to justify some new security measure.

"And, of course, the threat is purely imaginary," he concluded. "Unless you did meet some new aliens, out past the Rim…"

"No," Daria said. "There were always reports of odd sightings around deserted stars, but mostly none of them were every backed up with actual sensor data, so…"

She shrugged. "The issue of alien freedom, of course, will become one that we will play on, using the reporters as tools," she concluded. "I assume that you can handle that discreetly?"

Tiberius nodded. It helped that Colin expected his inner circle to disagree with him, even to argue with him, just to ensure that he heard every possible point of view. He would raise the concerns

privately, while ensuring that they would become public. Daria was right, after all, the human race would be adamantly opposed to anything reassembling alien rights.

"Tell me something," he said, finally. "Why alien rights? Why not the Union Movement, or the Socialists, or even the presence of Admiral Wilhelm?"

"Because alien rights are a harmless issue," Daria said. "Whatever the people might think, the combined force of all eight alien races couldn't harm the Empire in the slightest. The Unions, or the Socialist, or Admiral Wilhelm could cause serious harm to our interests." Her green eyes held his. "Never forget, our objective is not power for the sake of power, but power for the sake of reforming the Empire. We must be careful to do no additional harm to the Empire."

Tiberius blinked. "But this will do harm…"

"Of course," Daria said. She paused. "You see, I *know* Colin. He's a decent person, perhaps the most decent person I have met… and he's at a loose end. His objective was to come to Earth, break through Home Fleet and kick the Thousand Families in their collective nuts. He's done it, so… now what? He thinks in terms of doing the right thing and that, his sense of duty, is what's keeping him on Earth, trying to reform the Empire. He sees freeing the aliens as the right thing to do… and he isn't capable of delaying, or even stalling, because others might not agree with him."

She paused. "You do see the irony, don't you?

"And that makes him the wrong person to be leading the Empire," she concluded. "We need a reform process that will keep the Empire together, not one that will tear it apart… and that is the inevitable result of Colin's plans. If butting heads with Admiral Wilhelm doesn't force him to change his attitudes, we will have to remove him — for the good of the Empire."

"And us, of course," Tiberius said.

"You're in a position to ensure that the Cicero Family survives the coming upheavals with ease," Daria told him, flatly. "You have little to worry about, do you?"

She stood up. "Concentrate on your wedding and think about the future," she advised. "It promises to be better than the past."

* * *

"Someone was definitely trying to slip a bug into the Residence," Lord Pompey Cicero said, afterwards. Tiberius, who'd been pondering the future, looked up in alarm. Daria might be confident of Colin's general decency, but Tiberius wasn't sure that he shared her

confidence. “This one got caught in a bug field.”

He held out a tube, allowing Tiberius to peer into the magnification field. The bug was far too small for the unaided human eye to see it, even as a glint of metal against a dark background and even full magnification revealed little about it. It was capable of flying through the air and settling down anywhere, invisible and very hard to detect. It was the ultimate spying device.

“Good,” he said, finally. “Who sent this one?”

“I have no idea,” Pompey said, dryly. They might be contemporaries, but their social statuses were light-years apart. “You want a list of your enemies?”

He smiled at Tiberius’s expression. “It’s high-grade tech, Imperial Intelligence style, but it could have come from anywhere,” he added. “There are plenty of Family Members like me with contracts in Imperial Intelligence — or had contracts before the Provisional Government started cleaning out the rogues and bandits — and they could have sent it. And then there are all the newer factions, or the unions, or even the new government itself. It would be easier to list people who *didn’t* have access to such tech.”

Tiberius ran his hand through his hair. “I take it that you disabled it?”

“Of course,” Pompey said, sounding faintly insulted. “I did that at once, as I was taught to do, although the person who sent it would have known the minute it failed a routine call-check, or… hell, maybe it squealed before it was disabled. Still… someone was interested in you, sir, and I doubt that they wanted nude pictures of you in the bath.”

“I should hope not,” Tiberius snorted. The very idea was ridiculous. It was much more likely that one of his enemies was hoping to pick up useful or incriminating information. He wasn’t a security expert, not like Pompey, but he was fairly sure that if there was one bug, there would be others. “Go sweep for any other bugs and let me know if you find any. I have to think about this.”

“Think quick,” Pompey advised. “I doubt that Alicia would want to live in a bugged mansion.”

Chapter Seven

"Madam Ambassador, we are nearing the verge of the solar system now," Captain Dayton said, through the intercom. "Might I suggest that you come to the bridge when we make emergence?"

"Of course," Carola Wilhelm said. She allowed herself a smile at the obvious relief in his voice. Dayton might be loyal, very loyal, to Admiral Wilhelm, but the responsibility of ferrying an Ambassador and the Admiral's wife was a heavy one. "I shall be up there promptly."

She stood up as the channel closed and braced herself for the coming challenge. It was possible, she supposed, that the rebels would greet the *Victorious* with a hail of missiles — in which case her career as an Ambassador would come to a screeching halt — but she was fairly certain that they would choose to hear her out first, if nothing else. She'd read enough of the reports forwarded to her husband about the rebels to know that they took outdated concepts like the Moscow Accords and suchlike seriously, suggesting a certain naivety about how the universe worked. It would give her an opening she could use to make her case on Earth, before Parliament.

The mirror-field shimmered into existence at her command and she checked her appearance quickly, competently inspecting every inch of her body. She had allowed her dark hair to grow longer, but she wore it in a businesslike style, rather than allowing it to hang down and suggest a looser attitude. She had forsworn a uniform — it wasn't as if she was a legal member of the Imperial Navy, after all — and chosen, instead, to wear a dark suit, matching the colour of her hair. She was a petite woman — she'd often joked that she was a perfect fit for her husband — but she knew she looked impressive.

She heard the timer counting down the last minutes, but ignored it, concentrating on her plans. She'd met and married Admiral Wilhelm back when he'd been a lowly Commander, an irony that hadn't escaped her. Colin Harper had been a Commander when he'd started the rebellion against the Empire and turned the universe upside down. She'd promptly taken over her husband's career, boosting him upwards from Commander to Commodore and finally Admiral, even though it had involved dealing with the Hohenzollern Clan. The Thousand Families might have had the power, but in her experience they simply didn't have the intelligence or the mindset to take advantage of the chaos. Stacy Roosevelt might whine about how she wasn't being waited on hand and foot these days, but Carola had seen, right from the start, that there was opportunity for someone swift and ruthless enough to exploit it. Why shouldn't Markus

Wilhelm, and her through him, have a shot at the Imperial Throne?

After all, the rebels have just proved that the system can be overturned, she thought, as she pinned on her single piece of jewellery. The firestar gem gleamed between her breasts, shining out against the darkness of her suit, drawing the eye towards its light. They were rare, so rare that very few people would ever have a single piece made with the gems, but the aristocratic bitch who'd owned it would never need it again. It still made her smile. Lady Hohenzollern and Stacy Roosevelt had arrived at Cottbus, in the serene expectation that they still ruled, walking right into the trap. She would use or discard them as she willed.

The hatch hissed open as she walked out, the pair of armed bodyguards falling in behind her, forcing everyone they passed to give her plenty of room. Carola wasn't unaware of the dangers — the presence of her bodyguards would be resented — but there was little choice. Her husband might have been a competent strategist, but he lacked her killer instinct and insight into the human mind. They made a strong combination… but were they strong enough to outwit and defeat the rebels?

"Remain here," she said, as they reached the access hatch to the bridge. The sole guard posted there, a Marine, nodded to the bodyguards once, while allowing her access to the bridge. She'd seen the bridge before, but the hive of activity never failed to awe her. After all, she hadn't had any training and knew almost nothing about how the starship functioned. She had to trust the Captain to handle his ship, while she did the talking.

"Welcome," Captain Dayton said. He nodded towards the timer, showing the last five minutes before the starship re-emerged into normal space. Earth, as befitted the heart of the Empire, had emergence zones well away from the planet itself, unlike some other worlds. "Please take a seat."

He waved a hand towards a second chair, placed at the heart of the bridge. The *Victorious* had originally been designed as a flagship for a planned class of battlecruisers, although the rebellion had prevented the construction of additional units. The Commodore's chair was next to the Captain's chair, although it was slightly recessed, reminding everyone that the Captain had — in theory — the final authority on his ship. In practice, there were plenty of Commodores who were happy to run both the starship and the squadron themselves. The Imperial Navy, according to her husband, had never been short of friction between the ranks.

"I hope that this will be a gentle transition," she said, remembering her first faster-than-light flight with a shudder. "Did you program the drive so that we came out at rest to the planet?"

“Yes, My Lady,” Dayton assured her. “It should be as smooth a return to normal space as we get in this day and age.”

“Emergence,” the helmsman said. The starship’s lights flickered as it returned to normal space. “Emergence complete. Drive cycling down to standby and recharging.”

Carola braced herself, but she only felt queasy for a second, as if she had swallowed something bad. It was far more likely that a return to normal space would have left her on the verge of throwing up, but the helmsman and the engineers were clearly good at their jobs. Admiral Wilhelm had insisted on regenerating his entire fleet, partly as an excuse to avoid sending additional units to the front lines, and it showed. The Cottbus Sector Fleet was the best in the Empire, with the possible exception of the Shadow Fleet.

“Emergence zone is clear,” the sensor officer reported. “I am reading at least four squadrons of superdreadnaughts near Earth, twenty-one of them apparently of an unfamiliar design…”

“How do you know they’re superdreadnaughts?” Carola asked, interrupting him. She ignored the sidelong glance from the Captain, only vaguely aware that she had committed some breach of etiquette. “They could be other ships, couldn’t they?”

“Their power curves are far too large to be anything, but superdreadnaughts,” the sensor officer said, slowly. She got the impression he hadn’t known if he should answer her or not. “There are hundreds of sublight craft moving around in the system, but I don’t have any clear identification on them yet. There’s nothing in any position to engage us, unless they’re using cloaked pickets.”

Her bemusement must have shown on her face, for Captain Dayton explained. “The pirates are fond of lurking in an emergence zone under cloak and trying to hijack freighters when they emerge from flicker-space,” he said. If he resented having to explain what must have been basic details to her, he didn’t show it. “The rebels might have had a few ships lurking in the emergence zone, but apparently not. We’re not going to be launching probes, of course.”

Carola nodded. In a universe where any emerging attack force launched probes as a matter of course, looking for cloaked starships and other unpleasant surprises, launching probes alone could be considered a hostile act. Now that they were in the solar system, with at least four squadrons of superdreadnaughts nearby, she had the urge to be as unthreatening as possible. Any one of them could have blown the *Victorious* into flaming plasma if the battlecruiser came within range of their weapons.

“They will have picked us up the moment we arrived,” Captain Dayton added. “I suspect that they will be trying to decide if we’re an early section of an assault force or a starship that lost its way. The

longer they take to hail us and demand to know what we're doing here, the higher up the question will have gone before its answered."

"I see," Carola said. She glanced down at her timepiece. "We've been here for three minutes. Does that mean that the rebels haven't told their senior leaders that we're here?"

"I have no idea," Captain Dayton said. "The only thing we can do is…"

"*Contact*," the sensor officer snapped, as nine red icons flickered into existence on the display. An alarm rang and Carola found herself tensing up. "I have nine battlecruisers, flickering into long-range engagement range. They're sweeping us with targeting sensors…"

"Hold your fire," Captain Dayton said. Carola looked up at the red sensor beams washing over the display and shivered. The drive wouldn't have finished recharging yet. If the newcomers decided to open fire… the *Victorious* wouldn't last very long. "Do nothing without a direct order…"

The Victorious *won't be victorious*, a part of her mind whispered, tritely. *I guess I won't come home at all…*

Her life seemed to flash in front of her eyes. She remembered meeting Markus when they'd both been younger and accepting his suit, against the wishes of her parents. She remembered becoming part of the social scene, sucking up to the Thousand Families and doing everyone else down, while painstakingly manipulating everyone she could to enhance his career. As his star rose, so did hers, while outsiders were used or cast aside as she willed. Their relationship was an odd one, even by the standards of the Empire, but it had been comfortable and it had lasted. So many others didn't stand the test of time.

"We are being hailed," the communications officer said, finally. "They want to know what we're doing here."

"Transmit our standard IFF," Captain Dayton said. There was a long pause. "Ambassador, you're up next."

The display reformatted itself into a holographic flatscreen, showing a young woman wearing a light blue uniform. Carola recognised nothing, but the gold ring of a Captain she wore on her finger. She looked too young to be doing anything, but sitting in school and giggling over teenage crushes, but it was probably the effect of anti-aging treatments. Everyone who joined the Imperial Navy for a long term received them as a matter of course. It ensured that there was no shortage of volunteers and sweetened the treatment that new recruits received from their shipmates.

"*Victorious*, this is Captain Cabrera of the *William Butcher*," she said. Her voice wasn't young at all, but deep and cold. Carola mentally revised her estimate of the girl's age upwards. "You have entered

secure space. Please state your purpose or be fired upon."

Friendly, aren't they? Carola thought wryly. "This is Ambassador Wilhelm, representing the Cottbus Sector," she said, allowing ice to creep into her own voice. "Is this the way that you greet representatives to the new government?"

She pressed on before the rebel Captain could interrupt. "I have with me letters from the Sector Government and identification from the local councils," she continued. "I expected to present them to Parliament and the Provisional Government, not to be treated like a suspect and greeted with pointed weapons. I should warn you that such a reception could cause an interplanetary incident."

"Ah, welcome to Earth," the rebel said, clearly feeling a little out of her depth. Carola didn't blame her for that. The Empire's normal way of dealing with diplomatic issues was to send in the Imperial Navy to crush any dissent. Diplomacy was a forgotten skill on Earth, although someone who had spent years as a social queen would certainly understand the principles, if she could get over the idea that social inferiors were always permanently inferior. "Might I enquire as to your intentions?"

Carola sighed with exaggerated patience. "Of course," she said. "I intend to take up a parking orbit somewhere in orbit around Earth — yes, this entire ship is my Embassy, with diplomatic immunity under the Tau Ceti Convention — and present my credentials to the Provisional Government. Please would you designate us a parking orbit at once?"

There was a long pause. "I am transmitting a course now," the rebel said, finally. "I must warn you that if you bring up shields and weapons so close to Earth you will be fired upon without further warning. Any sign of a hostile act will draw a lethal response."

Her image vanished from the display. "Charming lot, aren't they?" Carola remarked, to no one in particular. She wasn't really annoyed. She would have been very surprised if the rebels had simply allowed them to take up low orbit without asking a few sharp questions first. "Captain, follow their course and don't deviate. Let's show them how obedient we can be."

She leaned back in her chair as the battlecruiser rumbled to life, following another of the enemy — no, the rebels, she reminded herself forcibly — battlecruisers towards Earth. Space seemed to be crowded around the planet, with massive defence fortresses competing with asteroid industry nodes and giant habitations. It wasn't much better out towards the Moon. Earth's companion was surrounded with its own halo of asteroids and stations, while hundreds of starships buzzed around, struggling to rebuild a tottering economic base.

Her eyes narrowed as she took in the sheer scale of the activity. It

was impressive enough, but she understood more about economics than she did about naval service and it suggested that the rebels were working frantically to rebuild their own forces. She knew better than to jump to any conclusions — there was no way to know for sure without access to some human intelligence and most of her old networks were probably in ruins by this time — but it was interesting… and worrying. If nothing else, the trip would be worthwhile because of the intelligence…

"They've designated a slot in high orbit, near one of the fortresses," Captain Dayton said, breaking into her thoughts. A white icon gleamed on the display. It looked uncomfortably close to a massive fortress, large enough for four superdreadnaughts, and she had to remind herself that the display wasn't to scale. The odds of an accidental collision would be minimal, although they would definitely be still within missile range. "I doubt that they will let us get any closer to the planet's surface."

Carola nodded. Even she knew the dangers of a single rogue starship so close to a planet — and, indeed, the rebels had let them get closer than she had expected. After the destruction of the eight cruisers — which, in hindsight, might have been a mistake — they had to suspect that Admiral Wilhelm was planning something, but they'd allowed her to come to the planet. They might want to know what she brought them, or perhaps they might want her to stand trial, or… she pushed the thought out of her head. There was no way to know, yet.

"Entering the gravity shadow now," the helmsman said. Carola had expected a bump, or some *feeling* that would have signified that they had crossed the line, but there was nothing. The only change would come if they tried to flicker out. If they were lucky, the only thing that would happen would be the drive burning out. The consequences if they weren't lucky didn't bear thinking about. "They've got us dead in their sights."

"As you were," Captain Dayton growled. He was feeling the tension as well, evidently, although he still looked calm. Carola, who had had plenty of experience in keeping her face firmly under control, couldn't have bettered it. "They've shown us no sign of hostility yet."

"Good," Carola said. She stood up and smiled. "Captain, signal the surface and request a landing site for us to meet with the provisional government so that I can present my credentials. Ask them, in particular, if they have a data package on the form of their new government that we can study. They'll try to set a time; accept anything after two hours."

She stepped off the bridge and allowed her bodyguards to lead her back to the cabin, where she waited until the data packet came

through the starship's computer systems, along with a note saying that the Provisional Government would be happy to meet with her in five hours. She considered, briefly, objecting, but it wasn't worth the effort. Besides, she wanted time to study and prepare for the meeting. She was grimly aware of just how little they knew, back at Cottbus, of the rebel government.

The data packet was surprisingly concise, which suggested that someone from outside the Thousand Families had written it. Carola knew that the Thousand Families could transform something as simple as an invitation to dinner into a two thousand-verse poem, but the data packet was simple. The Provisional Government was still taking shape, but its basic form was already clear. It might not have been style over substance, as she had feared, but it was understandable. They had decided that each world would be allowed to elect one MP, but owing to the size of the Empire only five hundred or so had come to Earth to take their seats.

It won't be too long before they start to faction, she thought. She had half-expected a dictatorship, with a veneer of democracy, but this seemed to be the real thing. She had to caution herself that they might be lying, or deceiving themselves, but it certainly read as if the writer believed what he was writing. Public Information could not have done a better job.

She smiled. She had anticipated difficulties, but it was going to be easier than she had thought.

Chapter Eight

"She wants to do *what*?"

"Address Parliament," Blondel Dupre said, calmly. "Legally, we can't stop her, I fear."

Colin scowled at her, feeling old. Blondel Dupre was almost unique on Earth, the only person who had a real feeling for how democracy worked in practice. She had been the First Speaker of Macore when the Empire had finally moved in to invade — after Colin had delayed the conquest by hijacking the superdreadnaughts that would have carried it out and turning them into the Shadow Fleet — and had, somehow, survived a year in hiding before Macore had been liberated. Colin had given her a position in Sector 117's government and then made her Prime Minister of the Provisional Government. It was something he sometimes regretted.

Unlike almost everyone on Earth, Blondel had never bothered with the rejuvenation and cosmetic treatments that were available for the asking. She looked old enough to be Colin's mother, with blonde hair that was shading towards grey, while she walked as if she was pained by old wounds. She might well have been; while Colin and the Shadow Fleet had been fighting a relatively clean war, Macore had been in the grips of the SDs and fighting a bitter insurgency against their rule. The statistics of the insurgency made grim reading, with nearly four million people killed, thousands more injured or molested by the SDs. Colin had taken an unholy glee in closing down the Security Detachments after the Fall of Earth and ending the treatments that turned young men into monstrous conscience-less creatures, but it hadn't been in time to save their victims. The SDs had looted, raped and slaughtered their way across countless planets, earning a fearsome reputation.

"We can't stop her?" Colin repeated. "Why the hell not?"

"There is a certain degree of… incoherence about our own government," Blondel said, flatly. "She claims to speak for the entire Cottbus Sector and has papers to back it up, signed by — she claims — people in authority. That makes her, according to our rules, an MP, despite the… incident at Cottbus itself."

"The destruction of eight cruisers and the deaths of five hundred young men and women," Colin said, coldly. It bothered him that he was more annoyed about the loss of the ships, rather than the crewmen, none of whom had deserved to die. "I do not regard that as a minor incident."

"Nor do I," Blondel said. Colin recalled that Macore would not have taken any such incident calmly. Power to the people sometimes

meant letting them make their own decisions. It had all seemed so easy back on the *General Montgomery*, when they hadn't even overcome Harmony, let alone Yanasaxon and Morrison. "The problem is that our system is still very fragile."

She sighed, falling back into a chair. "Parliament isn't sure of its own role," she warned. "The old Parliament didn't have anything to do and did it very well. The new Parliament is caught between reformers who think that they can make reform, factions that want to place their homeworlds ahead of anyone else and MPs who are too scared to lift their hands when they want to go to the toilet, because they think the Provisional Government is going to turn into a dictatorship."

"Over my dead body," Colin said, sharply.

"And mine," Blondel said, absently. "The problem is simple enough. According to our rules, which we created in hopes of forging a new government before someone managed to organise resistance to us, she qualifies as an MP. She must, therefore, be allowed to address Parliament."

"Politics," Colin said, rolling his eyes.

"And even if she didn't, the fact that she has something to say to Parliament has managed to get out into the open," Blondel continued, ignoring his aside. "My guess is that one of her people spread the word to one of the reporters, so now everyone wants to know what she has to say. We could refuse to allow her to speak, but even if we handled it carefully, we'd still look like we were covering something up behind a wall of Marines."

"I take your point," Colin said. "I take it that we don't have any idea of what she actually wants to say?"

"Nothing," Blondel said. She shook her head slowly. "It could be anything from a rant on behalf of the old order to a demand for our immediate surrender."

Colin snorted. "With a single battlecruiser in orbit?"

"They could have their entire fleet out there, lurking just beyond detection range," Blondel reminded him. "She's an Ambassador, legally, and offering her any insult is effectively the same as insulting her entire government."

"What a marvellously time-saving scheme," Colin said, dryly. Blondel was right. Earth's deep-space detection network was the most capable in the Empire, but the sheer volume of space between Sol and any other star had defeated it. Emergence signatures might radiate at FTL speeds, but they faded quickly, while anything else a light year from Earth would take a year to reach the outermost detectors. He'd pushed out sensor ships as far as he could, back when he'd been setting up the defences, but it would take minutes for any determined

opponent to reach Earth from outside their range. “Of course, they insulted us first…”

He scowled. Blondel was right — again. If they denied Carola Wilhelm — *Ambassador* Carola Wilhelm — a voice, they might provoke a conflict with Admiral Wilhelm. He suspected that the conflict was effectively inevitable anyway, particularly after the destruction of the *Garry Owen* and most of its squadron — but if the fighting could be delayed, the delay would serve them well… or would it? Just how far advanced were Admiral Wilhelm’s own plans? What *were* his plans?

“I hate the not knowing,” he said, grimly. Back when he’d commanded the Shadow Fleet, he had been fairly certain that the Empire couldn’t strike back at him; they had lacked any grasp of where his bases actually were. They couldn’t have hoped to locate them, except through sheer luck… and, to be fair, they *had* located one of the bases. They just hadn’t been able to find a target Colin *had* to protect and hammer it, forcing him to deploy in its defence…

But all that had changed. Any astrographic database would include, as a matter of course, the location of Earth and almost all of the Imperial Navy bases, including the ones that Colin had taken over in the wake of the Fall of Earth. Admiral Wilhelm would have plenty of targets to hit, while Colin couldn’t grit his teeth and ignore his blows, not if he wanted to keep confidence in the new government. If Admiral Wilhelm were alone, it would be bad enough, but if others had joined him… the results would be bad.

“They have managed to turn the tables, haven’t they?” He asked. Blondel nodded, once. “Very well. When does she want to address them?”

“The next session of Parliament is scheduled for two days from today,” Blondel said, after checking her terminal. “I suggest that she speaks then, unless she feels that it can wait longer…”

“Fine,” Colin said. If Carola refused to accept *that* offer, it would indicate all kinds of interesting things about her real purpose on Earth. The wife of an Admiral — apparently one from a happy marriage — wouldn’t be *just* an Ambassador, even if that *were* her primary purpose. Perhaps her real purpose was intelligence gathering. “I look forward to it with baited breath.”

He waited until Blondel had departed before he accessed his terminal and brought up the Imperial Intelligence files on Admiral Wilhelm and his wife. It still astonished him just how much information Imperial Intelligence had collected, just in the performance of their duties, even vague details like favourite ice cream and coffee blend. He’d struck a deal with the former Head of Intelligence, after the Fall of Earth, accepting the files in exchange for

not shooting them all out of hand, but they had barely been able to study a relative handful in the six months since their victory.

The thought made him smile. Anderson had told him, after checking out Colin's own file, that someone had edited it to cover themselves once the news of the rebellion had reached Earth. He'd been listed in terms that had ensured that promotion was no longer a possibility, but the new file had claimed that he had subversive inclinations, if not thoughts of outright treachery. The law of CYA, which pervaded the entire Empire, hadn't spared Imperial Intelligence. The only wonder was how the Empire had lasted so long.

A social climber, he decided, finally. The reports listed everything; every party, every connection, even every brief love affair. It would have been tempting to dismiss her, but he suspected, from Kathy's experience, that anyone who had climbed so high would be far more intelligent than they allowed people to suspect. Carola, it seemed, had worked to boost her husband's career… and had apparently succeeded. Admiral Wilhelm had been appointed as Sector Fleet commander some years before Colin had launched the rebellion… as a Hohenzollern client.

I wonder if Lady Hohenzollern is there, he thought, absently. *It would make a fine hiding place for her and the others who fled…*

He dismissed the thought and tapped his communicator. "Vincent, I want to see you in my office," he said, without preamble. "Come as soon as possible."

Anderson arrived within ten minutes. "I was checking out some leads," he said, by way of explanation. "What can I do for you, boss?"

Colin smiled. "The Ambassador," he said. There was no need to expand on who the Ambassador was. "What do you make of her?"

"She's managed to organise herself a small living space and embassy on the edge of Soul Rider," Anderson said, referring to one of the more eccentric sections of the High City. In fact, if Colin recalled correctly, it had been designed and built by the Hohenzollern Clan, centuries ago. It was an odd coincidence… if it was a coincidence. "So far, she doesn't seem to have done much, beyond looking up a few contacts from her days here. We managed to tap into the calls and they were mainly inanities and other shit. I think she's planning to hold a party within a week."

"So she doesn't plan to leave in a hurry," Colin said, thoughtfully. "That's interesting."

"Or she intends to leave right after she's spoken to Parliament and doesn't want us to know it," Anderson suggested. "She hasn't actually made any preparations for a party yet, as far as we know; no food, drink or entertainment. Of course, that could change, but…"

Colin nodded. "Who did she call?"

Anderson listed seven names. “There’s no one there from the… highest reaches of power, now or pre-rebellion,” he said. “The Wilhelm Family were apparently clients of the Hohenzollern Clan and wouldn’t have had any major links with the Cicero Clan, or the Roosevelt Clan, or anyone else. The only oddity is that one of the people she called was Lord Tyler.”

It took Colin a moment to make the connection. “Kathy’s father,” he said. It promised to be a worrying development. “What did she say to him?”

“Very little of interest,” Anderson said. “I can send you the recordings if you would like, but they were really basic greetings and a brief exchange about how lucky Tyler was to have recovered his daughter. I got the impression that Lord Tyler wasn’t entirely pleased about that.”

Colin snorted rudely. Lord Tyler had made a surprising amount of political capital out of his martyred daughter and then Kathy had ruined it by turning up alive. He’d then tried to exploit her position in the Provisional Government to enhance his Family, which had barely escaped ruin in the wake of Roosevelt’s collapse, but Kathy had refused to play ball. Lord Tyler hadn’t been too happy about that either.

“Too bad,” he said, finally. “Anything else?”

“Reading between the lines, I had the impression that they’d had an affair at one point, but there’s no way to know for sure,” Anderson concluded. “The only other suspicious detail is that Ambassador Wilhelm has instituted a *very* severe counter-surveillance regime in her embassy. I had some bugs in the building, but they were all found and deactivated within hours. She’s got some good people with her.”

“And the Tau Ceti Convention forbids us from bugging the embassy,” Colin concluded, sardonically. “If someone else actually bugs the embassy, they’d even be within their rights to go to war.”

He scowled. The Tau Ceti Convention, like the Moscow Accords, had been dragged up from the past to fill a need, but it was somewhat vague and open to interpretation. It dated from the days of the Federation and had been crafted to prevent further struggles between the Federation and what would become the first-rank worlds, but no one had used it for centuries. The embassy was effectively foreign soil and, by recognising it as an embassy, they were giving credence to Cottbus as an independent state, but what other choice was there? They couldn’t allow the Ambassador to use a battlecruiser as an Embassy!

“Yes, sir,” Anderson agreed. “I will keep an eye on her and let you know the minute the situation changes.”

“Please,” Colin said. “What is she doing now?”

“Researching,” Anderson said. “She’s studying all kinds of details on the new government, pulling them up from the database, so my guess is that she’s preparing for her speech. Past that…”

He shrugged. “Unless you want a more rigorous approach…”

“No, thank you,” Colin said. He shook his head. “Just keep a close eye on her and any others who happen to show up.”

“Understood,” Anderson said. “One other matter that has come to my attention; the first-rank council has been meeting, several times, over the last few days.”

Colin frowned. The first-rank worlds had covertly organised themselves to fight the Empire as a contingency plan, one that they’d put into operation after the Empire had attempted to scorch Gaul. They were used to working together without being detected, but now, with so many of their people in the new government, they were making waves.

“I see,” he said, finally. “How is this alarming?”

“Over the six months since we won the war, they met, on average, twice a month,” Anderson said. “They discussed matters of only limited interest and planned sessions in Parliament. Over the last two weeks, however, they have met seven times… and I have no idea what they discussed. Like pretty much every other player in the game, they took out our bugs and everyone else’s as well.”

Colin rolled his eyes. Everyone who was anyone had allies, spies and surveillance devices everywhere, trying to be the first to discover something that could be used for their own purposes. The first-rank worlds had had a superb intelligence network into their former masters, even touching Earth itself, and they were masters at countering the Empire’s probing spies. There was no reason to think that they were up to anything alarming, or so he hoped, but Anderson was right. It didn’t bode well.

“Keep an eye on it,” he ordered, finally. There was just so much to keep track of. “Inform me if anything changes.”

He turned his attention back to his terminal as Anderson saluted and left the office. Back when he’d founded the Shadow Fleet, he’d been surprised to discover just how much paperwork was still necessary, despite being on the run from the Empire and the prospect of a violent death somewhere in the near future. The government he’d created to run the liberated sectors had required yet more paperwork… and the Provisional Government was worst of all. He had to see hundreds of documents, requests, pleas and threats… and without looking at them, he couldn’t tell what was urgent and what could be safely ignored. Everyone seemed to think that he could devote himself exclusively to one issue, but he had so much to deal

with that he could barely shovel half of it onto his subordinates.

I should just ignore anything that's not marked urgent, he thought, sourly, as he opened yet another message. The sender seemed to believe that Colin had no other priority, but a pet scheme to terraform a few hundred worlds in order to create more living space. Colin junked it after reading the first few lines. The human race had been in space for nearly two thousand years, but only a handful of worlds had ever been terraformed. Mars had been terraformed, back in the days before the flicker drive, and a handful of others had been marked down for attention, but mostly there were plenty of habitable worlds without needing to go to the expense of a full terraforming project. The Empire did try to terraform some worlds, such as Harmony, on the cheap, but mostly it wasn't worth the effort.

He keyed his terminal absently and opened a new message file. "Record for Admiral Garland," he ordered. Katy and her fleet were still assembling at Jupiter. For once, the timing issue had worked out in their favour. "Katy, I am attaching details of the recent contact from Cottbus, but as far as I can see, this changes nothing. Unless the speech in front of Parliament is something radical, like an offer of surrender in exchange for amnesty, I suspect that you will still be in the fire. Hold the fleet until after the speech, then be ready to move out on a moment's notice."

The terminal paused at his command. *I could send the starfighters along with her*, he thought, considering the possibility. It was unlikely in the extreme that Admiral Wilhelm would have anything to match them, although he would probably have arsenal ships by now. That cat was very definitely out of the bag. He shook his head after a moment. The starfighters were still an untested weapon of war.

He rekeyed the terminal. "I want a full report on your current status no later than a day after receipt of this message," he concluded. "I have a feeling that the shit is about to hit the fan."

Chapter Nine

Carola had never actually entered the Parliament building before. Indeed, she couldn't actually remember if she'd ever actually *seen* it, although she had spent years in the High City, once upon a time. She looked back on those years fondly, but with ultimate power within her grasp — and that of her husband — the memories were more a source of private amusement rather than something to keep her warm in the night. She'd spent four days on Earth, mainly chatting to old friends, and reading between the lines it was easy to see that they were scared. Their universe had turned upside down.

And some of them think that we're going to be putting them back on top, she thought, remembering Stacy Roosevelt. The silly bitch hadn't realised, unlike Lady Hohenzollern, that she was effectively in a trap, one of her own making. She had believed that Admiral Wilhelm would continue to serve them, and indeed Carola had encouraged her husband to keep up the pretence, but the truth was that the two aristocrats — and the rest of the reactionaries — would serve them now. They might be useful for their links to the remainder of the Thousand Families, or perhaps they could be used as scapegoats for the attack on the rebel cruisers. There were just so many possibilities.

The interior of Parliament showed the signs of a quick renovation, carried out by the High City's staff of workers. It looked surprisingly low-key for such an important building, in stark contrast to the Imperial Palace where the Emperors and Empress had held court, or some of the mansions belonging to the Thousand Families, but no one had bothered to give Parliament a building fit for its status. Or, perhaps, they had. No one was used to thinking of Parliament as a real power, not yet. She wondered, with a half smile, how long it would be before the MPs started to factionalise. She would have been surprised if the process wasn't already underway.

All men want power, she reminded herself, as her guide showed her into the main chamber. *Given a chance, they will reach for that power without thinking of the possible consequences… or without caring.*

The main chamber was larger than she had expected, although it also looked remarkably cramped. Parliament had originally had only three hundred MPs, representing the various worlds of the then-Empire through a complicated process that no one fully understood and was easy to game by someone unscrupulous. The Fall of Earth and the rise of the Provisional Government had ensured the creation of a new government, obeying new rules… and one of them was that each world would have an MP. Carola could see several flaws with that scheme, starting with the problem that the Empire's different worlds

had populations ranging between hundreds of thousands to the billions, but as an ideal it was understandable. It would also mean that they would have to fit, somehow, three thousand MPs into the chamber… and she doubted that that would be possible. The chamber only held five hundred MPs and it was already packed.

She allowed her gaze to swing over the MPs slowly, knowing that most of them would be studying her and for the same reason, know thy enemy. They were a mixed bunch, curiously dressed in the formal uniform for an MP, with long dark robes and white wigs that hung down their backs. At one time, it might have given them an aura of quiet dignity, but Carola found them vaguely ridiculous. They looked like butlers from one of the more traditionalist Families. The Great God Tradition might demand that they wore their formal outfits to all formal meetings, but she guessed that they were wearing really loose outfits underneath. The thought made her smile openly, even though some of the MPs would probably take that as a challenge.

The briefing packet hadn't said much about how Parliament actually conducted its business, so she suspected that they were still working that out. Giving each of the MPs a say would take forever, so they would probably decide to go with a single voice vote for each question put before the House. The advantage of a new government, as she'd found back at Cottbus, was that the rules would be still very loose. The odds were that at least some of the MPs would take bribes, if they were offered, whatever the rules said. They probably weren't getting paid very much for serving their people.

Their chairs were organised in a vast circle, positioned so that they could all see the speaker at one end of the room. Blondel Dupre was speaking, her voice carried through the entire room by a sound-effect field, and Carola studied her with interest. A person — a lady, no less — who had forsaken cosmetic treatments was either someone who didn't care about their appearance, or knew what they were and had nothing to prove to anyone. Carola respected that. In another world, Blondel and her could have been friends. They had the same attitude to life.

Her guide tapped at her arm. "You'll be standing there while you address Parliament," he muttered, pointing to a platform. It was below Blondel's position, much to Carola's amusement, for it reflected how the original designers had seen people who spoke before Parliament. They were not coming as equals, but as supplicants, a deep irony to anyone who knew the role Parliament had held before the rebellion. "Do you have your speech prepared?"

"Of course," Carola said, as if she were irritated. She tapped the side of her forehead with one long finger. "I am always prepared."

She looked up at the Stranger's Gallery, high overhead, and saw a

handful of familiar faces. Colin Harper looked older than she had expected, in sprit if not in body, while the redheaded woman next to him seemed privately amused by the entire proceeding. A blonde-haired girl, hauntingly beautiful, was studying her; Carola recognised Gwendolyn Cicero with a jerk. That made the younger man sitting next to *her* Tiberius Cicero, the man that Lady Hohenzollern and Stacy Roosevelt blamed for everything. It was hard to see any ogre in his eyes. They were just that of a young man, worried for the future.

If I had a molecular dispensing field or even a bomb, I could wipe out the heart of the rebellion, she thought, coldly. It would have killed her as well, however, and security had been very tight. They hadn't exactly strip-searched her — that would have been a deadly insult to an Ambassador — but they'd searched her handbag and run all kinds of sensors over her. If she'd been used to carrying weapons, she would have felt distinctly naked, but she didn't even know how to fire a gun. It wasn't a skill that was in demand in high society.

The thought made her smile again. There were some members of high society, as shallow as they were — or had been — that she would miss, but most of them would improve the human race enormously if they died. There were hundreds of men and women, snubbed by their social superiors, who threatened violence, but none ever had carried out their threats. There were times when Carola regretted that, even though she might have been a target herself; they could have cleaned up high society overnight. Now, of course, most of the really snooty ones were hiding in their mansions, trying desperately to prove to themselves that nothing had really changed.

Her guide nudged her forward as Blondel introduced her. "Ambassador Carola Wilhelm has come from Cottbus to speak before us," she said. Carola stepped forwards, onto the dais, as the MPs rose briefly. She was surprised by that show of respect, but she wondered if Blondel fully appreciated what she'd done. By honouring her as an Ambassador, she'd ensured that Carola's status was not in doubt.

Someone shouted, from the back. "And what happened to our ships?"

Carola ignored him, even thought she'd been surprised. Looking up into the faces of the massed MPs, something in her soul tried to cringe, even though she'd faced worse in high society. There was something about the building that focused all of their attention on her, pointing over a thousand eyes at her, and it was hugely intimidating. There were people who would sooner have fought the Dathi stark naked than speak in public and even though Carola had had that beaten out of her at an early age, it was still terrifying. If she hadn't prepared most of her speech beforehand, using formalities so old that few even remembered they existed, she would have been

completely tongue-tied.

"Honoured Members, Speaker of the House, thank you for welcoming me," she said, carefully formal. Once she'd started to speak, it became much easier. It was crossing the first hurdle that was so hard. "I come to you as a representative of the Cottbus Sector, liberated by Admiral Wilhelm from the tyranny of the Hohenzollern Clan."

We'll have to arrest them after all, she thought, as gasps echoed through the room. The main disadvantage with the sound-effect field was that it picked up almost everything, despite the best filtration software money could buy, and projected it over the entire room. The MPs reactions would be painfully obvious, even if she could barely make out their faces. Some would believe her, some would refuse to believe her, and some would pretend to believe her. The contest was up and running…

"When we heard about the rebellion, we prepared our own plans, and struck after the Fall of Earth," she continued. The irony was that she wasn't really lying, even if it meant discarding Lady Hohenzollern and Stacy Roosevelt. Perhaps there would be an SD left to… entertain the latter. "We removed the handful of clients who refused to switch sides, deprogrammed the SD troopers and took control of everything within the sector, including the Type-I shipyard created by the Empire."

There were more gasps — and a great deal of calculation — at that point. Type-I shipyards were rare — there were only three of them in the Empire, one of which had been seriously damaged during the rebellion — and they produced superdreadnaughts. Given time, of course, newer facilities could be constructed, but the Cottbus Sector would have a lead on anyone else. Admiral Wilhelm had started expanding the shipyard and its workforce at once, but the Hohenzollern Clan had left the entire system a ghastly mess. Merely sacking a handful of managers had improved efficiency by thirty percent. The rebels wanted — they *had* to want — that shipyard.

"While you were debating the formation of a new government, we were holding elections and producing a provisional government of our own," she said. That was a flat lie, at least in part; the provisional government was effectively a military one, ruled by Admiral Wilhelm. "We were organising ourselves when your cruisers arrived and, owing to an unfortunate series of circumstances, we believed that they intended to ram our command fortress, which would have killed most of our government. We opened fire on the ships and destroyed them. It was a dreadful mistake for which we take full responsibility."

She paused. "And now we have to make a decision about the future of the Empire.

"We have heard much through the ICN about the plans for a new Empire," she said, hoping that her voice convoyed only what she wanted it to convoy. This was the delicate part. "We want no part of them. We organised ourselves, without help from you, and we deny your right to dictate to us what we should do. We do not wish to be part of an Empire where the Thousand Families continue to have a hand in government, or in running facilities against the will of their own workers, or where aliens are granted the freedom to prey on the human race again. This is the decision of the entire sector."

And now we're definitely going to have to shoot them, she thought, as the MPs came alive, some shouting, others calling out objections. The chaos would have been deafening without the sound-effect field compensating, but it was still painful to hear and showed, all too clearly, the weakness of the new government. They might have had their own doubts about the aliens, or about letting the former rulers of the Empire take a hand in the new Empire, but they wouldn't appreciate her words, if only because they were so close to their own feelings.

Blondel pushed a button on her panel and the sound-effect field blanked out. Carola winced at the sudden deadness in her ear — the field was suppressing all sound — before it faded and was gone. It was, she recalled, sometimes used as a torture instrument by the SDs, something that had probably passed Parliament without being noticed. They wouldn't have been happy to know that, with a few careful adjustments, it could be used to deliver tremendous pain, even if it would concentrate a few minds.

"May I remind the Honourable Members," Blondel said, "that this is the Parliament of the Empire, not some debating society or spacers bar? The Empire expects its chosen leaders to comport themselves in a manner befitting their status. If you cannot control yourselves, I will have the room cleared until tempers have cooled."

The MPs settled down, with a vague undercurrent of mass rebellion. "Ambassador, you may continue," Blondel said, icily.

"You have illustrated my point," Carola said. "You claim to represent the entire Empire, but I see no one from Cottbus in the room, apart from myself. How many sectors lack a representative? How far does your writ actually run?"

She peered around the room. "We — the people of Cottbus — do not, cannot, trust a government that includes representatives, far too many representatives, from the old order," she said. "How can we trust them when they have looted, raped and exploited our worlds? We made a choice, Honourable Members, and that choice is to go our own way. The Cottbus Sector is formally declaring independence from the Empire.

"We will, of course, exchange Ambassadors and I see no reason for any immediate hostilities," she concluded. She pushed a note of sincere regret into her voice. "We believe, however, that this is for the best."

There was a long pause… and then there was a barrage of questions, each one more intimidating than a missile salvo. Why don't you trust us? What proof do you have that this is what your people want? Why don't you like the aliens? Why? Why? Why?

Blondel tapped for silence, again. "There is no precedent for having an Ambassador in the Chamber," she said, "and we cannot force you to answer questions, but if you would consider…"

"Of course," Carola said, scenting victory. The rebels were already unsure of their own ground. Ironically, if they dismissed Cottbus's demand for independence out of hand, they called into question the very legitimacy of their own government. The Empire had been legitimate because it had been the only government for nearly a thousand years. The Provisional Government was barely six months old. "I would be honoured to serve the cause of truth and answer question."

An MP pushed his buzzer. "Your government is led by a former Admiral in the Imperial Navy," he said. "A Hohenzollern client, no less. How do we know that you are telling the truth?"

"*Your* government is led by a former Imperial Navy Commander," Carola pointed out. She carefully resisted the temptation to look up and see how Colin was taking it. It would have made her point altogether too blatant. "I doubt that there is a one of you who has not, in the past, had some dealings with the Thousand Families — they were, after all, the only game in town. Markus had no choice, but to prostitute himself for the Hohenzollern Clan, until you offered him the chance to break their ties and lead an entire sector to liberation."

"You haven't answered the question," another MP said. She was clearly a sharper customer than the last one. "You claim to have run a referendum on your worlds, but we have no independent verification of this fact. Why should we take your word for it?"

"Leaving aside the question of delivering an insult to us, which you have by questioning our word, we would be happy to allow you to survey our people," Carola said. By the time the rebels got organised to do just that, it would be easy to rig things to show a false positive. Of course, the irony was that that might well be what the sector actually wanted. "I imagine that you could verify our words fairly quickly."

"I don't know much about verification, but I do know that you killed several hundred young men," a third MP said. "How do you intend to recompense us for their loss, seeing as you claim it was an

accident?"

"We will replace all eight of the cruisers with ships from our sector fleet and we will include a battlecruiser in payment for the men," Carola said, pushing regret into her voice. "We cannot bring them back from the dead, but we can ensure that their deaths were not in vain."

"And, assuming that we recognise you as independent, what about trade?"

Carola smiled as the bombardment of questions continued. They hadn't noticed, but they were already accepting Cottbus as an independent state. Given enough time, she could ensure that there would be several dozen MPs who had a strong incentive to keep Cottbus independent, whatever the nature of its government. There would be representatives from worlds along the border, or from the Freebooters, or others… and they would all support her, willingly or no. She was enjoying herself.

Hah, she thought, carefully not looking at any of the rebel leaders. *If the game wasn't worth the candle, no one would play…*

Chapter Ten

"Smoothed tongued bitch, isn't she?"

"I wouldn't know," Tiberius said. "Carola Wilhelm was before my time as Heir."

Colin shrugged. From what he'd heard of Tiberius, he'd originally been a younger son who shouldn't have ever had a chance to become Head. Only the death of his father and elder brothers had seen him tossed into the seat, but he'd used the time as a younger son to grow more pragmatic than most of the Thousand Families. His success and power had come at a very high price indeed.

"It's an interesting problem," Colin said, finally. His first response, once he'd been back in his office, hadn't been a kind one. Carola was playing games and even though he could see the game, it was still going to be difficult to outmanoeuvre her, let alone her husband. "Do you think that she's telling the truth?"

"I find her story believable," Tiberius said. "You revolted and others, including Kathy, joined up with your rebellion. It's quite possible that others would have done the same, particularly after the Empire's various enforcement arms collapsed into nothing. Imperial Intelligence was crippled a long time before you took it over and started to reform it. She *could* be telling the truth."

"I doubt it," Daria said, flatly. "There are too many unanswered questions. I'm not an expert in space warfare, but why would they have thought that a pack of eight cruisers posed a threat to Cottbus itself? They had enough firepower around that world to stand off the Shadow Fleet."

"Not for that long," Colin said, remembering some of the new weapons the Geeks had developed for the final battles of the war. The odds were good that Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't have been able to develop most of them, not with the research base his patrons had left him. He might be able to develop arsenal ships and perhaps the new missiles, but he wouldn't even be thinking in terms of starfighters. "Still, it's a sign that something clearly isn't right. They could have issued their declaration of independence to the cruisers instead."

He shook his head. "Do we assume that it's a lie and proceed to invade the sector, or do we pretend to accept it at face value?"

"We may have little choice," René Goscinny said. "I could think of half a dozen first-rank worlds that would… view with alarm any attempt by us to force Cottbus and its assorted worlds back into the Empire. It would certainly suggest to other worlds that we would use force on them if they didn't play our game and incite more rebellious feeling. Unrest doesn't work in our favour, Colin, and if we act too

quickly, we will only cause more of it."

Colin scowled up at the display. It was showing the Cottbus Sector, with each of the stars blinking a dull red in the holographic image, suggesting hostility. Even if Admiral Wilhelm didn't have any allies from the other nearby sectors, it was still going to be a bitch to invade. The defenders could call on a considerable number of starships and their worlds were very well defended. They had space they could trade for time.

And it wasn't even like the Morrison Campaign. There, the hundreds of worlds that had been briefly raided by the Shadow Fleet had been effectively irrelevant to the campaign. Morrison, Orland, Gaza and Candleford had been important, but the other worlds, like the pleasure planet Paradise Rest, had added nothing to the struggle. He hadn't bothered to secure them, refusing to tie down his own forces where the Empire could go after them, but now the positions were reversed. He would have to invest, conquer and garrison at least a dozen worlds and, in the meantime, Admiral Wilhelm could be raising havoc in the Empire.

"We have good reason to think he's lying," Colin said. He shook his head. "Can't we convince Parliament of that?"

"It's not that simple," Blondel said, softly. "Colin, politics are governed by perception more than reality. The perception of us, now, is that we are talking the talk, but that we might not be walking the walk. We're telling everyone that we believe in democracy, but that means that we have to accept all the democracy, including the votes that go against us. So far, we have a lot of goodwill and a solid reputation, but that could be destroyed very quickly if we act too fast."

She nodded towards the display. "There are hundreds of worlds that would bolt from the Empire if they believed that we were just going to be like the old Empire," she continued. "They may find it… expedient to believe that Cottbus has indeed held a democratic election — because Ambassador Wilhelm touched on so many of their own concerns — and support her. They won't see it as a case of us destroying a remnant of the old order, but of us forcing our will on people who don't want to follow us. In the long run, that could prove fatal."

Her voice darkened. "We might win a war and lose an Empire," she concluded. "I don't think that that would be a good victory."

Daria snorted. "Aren't you forgetting something?" She asked. There was little love lost between the two women, although Colin had never been sure why. They were cut from similar cloth. "The odds are that Admiral Wilhelm has created a military state, ruled by himself, and intends to either keep what he has or claim more from the other

sectors near him. If we do nothing about it, are we not as guilty as him?"

She smiled thinly. "We rebelled against the Empire, which turned a blind eye to thousands of abuses, even the ones it didn't cause," she said. She looked Colin right in the eye. "Are we going to turn a blind eye to this particular abuse?"

Colin scowled. He had to admit that she had a point. Like it or hate it, the Empire had kept a firm lid on thousands of petty human conflicts, often over the strangest things. New Kabul's civil war had been brought to an end by the mass slaughter of the armies and leaders involved, hundreds of thousands of pirates and wreckers had been mercilessly hunted down… and that was only the beginning. The demise of the Empire had brought all of those crises back into existence and forced them to either act to prevent them, which meant that they would be accused of being imperialistic, or watching helplessly as thousands of innocents were slaughtered. The refugee crisis alone was unbelievable and would have been a lot worse if more starships had been available.

Daria pressed her case. "We know nothing for sure, beyond the fact that Cottbus lured our ships into an ambush and destroyed them once they were past any hope of escape," she continued. She tapped the table to underline her words. "That is the only thing we *know*. The details about it being an democratic state, wanting independence from the Empire, are what we've been told. It looks like a *Jonah Rotten* to me."

There were some chuckles. The original *Jonah Rotten* had been an Imperial Navy Q-Ship. It had looked like a harmless bulk freighter, operated by an independent shipping firm, until the pirates had slipped into weapons range. The freighter had hit their ship with enough fission beams to cripple it, boarded it and then, once they'd completed their mission, launched the surviving pirates into space. Pirates, who wanted to get home and spend their ill-gotten loot, had given every other bulk freighter a wide berth from then on for a few years. It had been one of the more successful tactics the Imperial Navy had deployed.

"At the very least, we should assume that this isn't right," she concluded. "I propose that we move the 2nd Fleet out to Hawthorn anyway, as we planned, accompanied by a team of people who can...investigate their claims. We can send in covert operatives as well, people who can land on their worlds without being noticed; hell, the League has been discussing expanding into that territory. We get in there, we find out what the hell is going on, and if he's created a military state, we act against it."

"We could probably sell that to the first-rank worlds," Goscinny

said, finally. He sounded rather reluctant, but accepting. “They might insist on sending along their own representatives…”

Colin smiled. “René, why don’t you go?”

Goscinny nodded. “I think that that would probably be the best choice,” he said. “I’ll be wanting danger money, of course.” Colin laughed. The Empire was barely in the black and money was very tight. Paying danger money might have had a serious effect on the economy. “More seriously, if you’ll give me a day or two, I can assemble a team from the first-rank representatives on Earth, including a handful of MPs.”

“And they might be taken and altered,” Daria warned. “If that happens, they will come back singing Wilhelm’s praises and we’ll be no wiser than we already are.”

“I know,” Goscinny said. He sounded a little nervous, but refused to surrender. “I’ll just have to take the risk.”

Brave man, Colin thought. Imperial Intelligence had had a long history of ‘altering’ people who rebelled against the Empire, using their mental technology to turn them into puppets, or loyal servants of the Empire. Some of them hadn’t even known that they were slaves to the Empire and had believed, truly, that they were still working against it, even as they led rebel bands into traps or worse. They never lasted long — the human mind didn’t like such control and eventually collapsed — but while they lasted, they could be devastating. Trust became impossible when you never knew who could be unknowingly working for the Empire.

“Good,” Colin said. He looked around the room. “We’ll send the 2nd Fleet out to Hawthorn and send some representatives with it. They can investigate the situation and discover just what we’re actually dealing with. Are there any objections?”

There were none.

“I have a proposal,” Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter said. “If we’re sending out Admiral Garland, she should be ordered not to initiate hostilities, but to launch covert surveillance missions into the sector to discover what might actually be going on. A handful of picketing destroyers might be more useful than any agent on the ground.”

Colin scowled. He was an Imperial Navy officer, or at least he’d *been* an Imperial Navy officer, and every bone in his body was calling out for him to crush the potential threat before it crushed him. He might have become a politician, but he still had problems accepting the give and take of politics, even if there was no choice. Blondel was right. If they acted harshly and quickly, it would destroy their reputation.

“We also need to clarify her status,” Blondel continued. Her firm

voice demanded respect. “In hindsight, we had little choice, but to allow her to address Parliament. We need to decide, now, what she is and how we should deal with her.”

She stood up and started to pace. “She’s either a Member of Parliament herself, in which case Cottbus is actually a part of the Empire, or an Ambassador, in which case we have effectively recognised Cottbus’s independence,” she continued. “At the moment, she seems to be both; hell, we’ve treated her as both. We could maintain the fiction that she’s a non-voting MP or something, but…”

“Cicero sent Ambassadors to us during the rebellion,” Colin said, not missing the sharp glance that Joshua sent Tiberius. He evidently hadn’t known that little detail, which was interesting. It was definitely something to think about later. “We do have a certain amount of precedent.”

“Not for something like this,” Daria said firmly. “The two situations are not exactly compatible. We knew, back then, that it was us or them. There was no thought of a compromise, nor could we have worked one out even if we had considered it. This is something different. Cottbus *could* become an independent stellar nation… and that is something that we cannot allow. It would shatter the Empire.

“There are still sectors governed by the last remains of the old order,” she continued, altering the display to show the nine sectors that probably only had an inkling that something had changed on Earth. “If we allow this precedent to stand, we will have those sectors declaring independence as well… and we won’t have a legal leg to deal with them. How could we invade and liberate them from tyranny when we left one alone because of legal quibbling?”

“That’s the sort of logic that worries the first-rank worlds,” Goscinny said. “The Empire didn’t interfere — often — with our internal customs. The price for our acquiescence to the Empire’s overall rule was internal autonomy. Yes, the Empire did move into our spheres more and more as time went on, but it didn’t interfere with our customs.”

He paused. “Gaul has several customs that most of you will find a little odd,” he said. “They’re not even the strangest, or perhaps the most outrageous, customs, covering everything from sex to religion and everything in-between. What they — we — regard as traditional customs you will find unpleasant, perhaps even repulsive. A threat to them will still be taken very seriously.”

“I seem to recall,” Joshua said, “one of my best officers coming from a world where she would be regarded as having no role, but being barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. I fail to see why such customs should be tolerated.”

“You may be right,” Goscinny acknowledged. He leaned forward,

dismissing the argument. “The point is that such customs are very important to the first-rank worlds and interfering with them will only provoke anger.”

“I think we’re getting a little off-topic here,” Colin said, before the argument could grow any further. He could see, as he often could these days, both sides of the issue. It might have been the price of playing politics, but he suspected that he was losing his idealism, or even his determination to do what was right, regardless of the cost. “We will investigate Cottbus and proceed from there. Once we know what we’re dealing with, we can decide what to do next.”

He watched as, one by one, they filed out of the room. He hated to admit it, but there were times when he wished he’d just gone renegade or maybe even remained a mere Commander, permanently under Percival’s thumb. There, he hadn’t even known how lucky he was, while now the whole weight of the Empire rested on his shoulders. He couldn’t even put it down without risking the loss of everything they’d fought for. Billions of lives rested in his hands…

Politics, he thought, in disgust.

* * *

The Embassy, as she had decided to call it, was small, but functional. Carola had set up a pair of rooms for herself and her bodyguards, a second pair for her assistants, and little else. There was no point in cramming the building full of luxuries… and besides, she was trying to signify a major break with the past. The Cottbus Embassy didn’t need luxury, or wealth, but a businesslike attitude.

“I want you to hire a long-range courier boat,” she ordered one of her assistants, as she paced around her office. “I’ll provide the secure data packets for Markus to read, once they get to Cottbus. Make sure you pick one of the independent firms and not something owned by the Families.”

“Yes, Ambassador,” the aide said, and headed out the door.

Carola threw herself into her armchair — her sole concession to luxury — and rubbed her hands together with glee. It had all worked perfectly — well, *almost* perfectly. She had hoped that Parliament would vote to accept her as Ambassador without further delay, but it seemed that saner voices had prevailed. That was hardly a surprise; they didn’t have any means of verifying what she’d told them and they would be foolish to accept her without finding some way to verify her claims. It would take them at least two months to come close to identifying the truth… and by then, she would have her hooks deep into Earth’s population.

She smiled as she reached for her terminal and scrolled through the messages. As she had expected, the number of messages had skyrocketed after she had addressed Parliament, with everything from requests for dinner with MPs to offers of business relations from various firms and Family-owned corporations. She would turn down the latter, of course, and rely on the former; they would have to back her politically, or discover that their own government was hurting them. It was a neat little trap that the rebels couldn't hope to escape, unless they tore down their own rules. She doubted that they would do anything of the sort.

In the end, she suspected, they would probably try to move in on Cottbus anyway, only to discover that Admiral Wilhelm wasn't alone after all. The war would be long and bloody, but by then, she was confident of victory. The Empire was ripe for the taking… and it would be her, in the end, who sat beside her husband on the Imperial Throne.

Her other assistant knocked on the door. "Ambassador, we have a direct call for you," she said. Carola looked up, annoyed. There had been hundreds of direct calls for her, most of which she had been forced to reject. Her time was too short to exchange inane pleasantries with everyone who thought that they were important. "I believe that you should take this one."

"Oh, really?" Carola asked. She had made her position on direct calls quite clear. They weren't allowed to talk to her unless it was something very important indeed. "And why is this one so important?"

"It's someone you might remember," the aide said. "It's Gwendolyn Cicero."

Chapter Eleven

"I don't want any formalities," Goscinny said, as the shuttle landed neatly in the *Jefferson's* shuttlebay. "I just want to remain a mere passenger."

"A passenger with thirty aides, assistants and gofers," Admiral Katy Garland said dryly. "And, I might add, three whole squadrons of superdreadnaughts to escort him to his new workplace. How many members of the Thousand Families had such an escort?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Goscinny said, realising that he was being teased. "I don't want to start a habit of enjoying such accommodations."

Katy nodded. The old Imperial Navy had been fond, very fond, of grand formalities when hosting senior dignities, from entire greeting parties to celebrations and astonishing luxuries, at least for the guest. The ordinary crewmen wouldn't see any change in *their* treatment even if they were convoying a Clan Head. The new Imperial Navy, as designed and shaped by Colin and his inner circle, was much less keen on such formalities, regarding them as a waste of effort. Katy privately suspected that some officers regretted their passing, but she wasn't one of them. The idea of treating a guest onboard her starship so well was almost insulting.

"Nor should you," she said, finally. "I prevailed upon Captain Chalker to leave out most of the formalities, just so you could be introduced to the starship gradually." She smiled. "Besides, everyone is very busy at the moment and they don't have time to down tools and welcome us onboard."

"I know," Goscinny said. The pressure to move, from the arrival of the *Victorious* and its Ambassador, had only been growing stronger. Katy had barely had time to carry out a few minor exercises and she wasn't confident in the gunnery capability of half her ships. There should have been months, at least, to work the fleet up properly and turn it into a well-drilled weapon, but events, as always, had dictated their own pace. "How confident are you of success if we had to fight it out with Cottbus?"

Katy left the question unanswered as they boarded the massive superdreadnaught, exchanged greetings with the Captain and two of his officers — somehow, she wasn't surprised that Captain Toby Chalker had found time to greet her personally, even through it was far from her first time onboard — and allowed the Captain to show Goscinny to his cabin. The *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts didn't leave as much room for passengers as the more standard *General*-class ships, but they still managed to create enough room for

Goscinny and his aides. The ship itself felt distinctly undermanned, but that was the result of the automation the Geeks had built into the ship. It was something that worried her. The *Jefferson* might have twice the effective firepower of a *General*-class superdreadnaught, but if she were ever to be seriously damaged, she would find herself in much more trouble. The Damage Control departments had suffered heavily.

"So," Goscinny said, as they settled down into his cabin. She declined an offer of brandy and accepted, instead, a mug of coffee. The warm liquid felt wonderful after so long preparing the fleet. "You never answered my question."

"I couldn't answer your question," Katy said, slowly. "I don't know the exact situation and just what we will be facing. Assuming that we face everything that was listed as being part of the Cottbus Sector Fleet — and given that that listing comes from a year ago, it won't be accurate — we should be able to defeat them in a stand-up battle. The advantages of this ship and the experienced crews scattered through our units should give us a decisive advantage."

She paused. "I wouldn't want to recommend that we do anything hasty," she added. "I want to gather as much intelligence as possible before making any moves, which will allow us to target them more effectively. I find it hard to believe that they won't have arsenal ships, for example, or even modified gunboats and destroyers. The concepts were introduced over a year ago and there was nothing wrong with the sensor data the Empire collected. Hell, they hit us with arsenal ships at Morrison."

The memory of the damaged and trapped *Havoc*, exposed to merciless fire, rose unbidden in her mind and she shivered. She had wondered, deep inside, if she had lost her nerve then, after she'd been defeated and taken prisoner. If it hadn't been for a honest Imperial Navy Admiral, a concept that still surprised her, she would have been handed over to the SDs… and whatever was left of her after their interrogation would have been shot for mutiny. She still had nightmares about being a helpless prisoner…

"I see," Goscinny said. If he followed her thoughts, he showed no sign of it. "And would you support military action if I recommended it?"

Katy smiled. Colin had instituted one major change for the mission; *she*, not Goscinny, was the final arbiter of military action. If she believed that the mission was impossible, or if circumstances changed radically, she had the authority to refuse to take her ships into harm's way, although if Admiral Wilhelm did intend to start something, there would be no way that she could avoid engagement. She'd probably be second-guessed by everyone, after the fact, but it

would be a worthwhile price to pay for keeping her ships and crews safe. Her only worry was that she might use it as an excuse to remain out of the firing line.

"It depends on what we find," she said. "Now, I have a question for you. Why exactly aren't we going straight to Cottbus, bashing down the door and demanding answers about the destruction of our ships?"

Goscinny considered, stroking his chin absently. "Because we don't know exactly what is going on out there," he said, finally. "We don't know just what he's doing…"

"Bullshit," Katy said. "We know that he created a deliberate ambush and blew eight of our ships away, without provocation of any kind. The shooting, Mr Ambassador, has already started."

"True enough," Goscinny said, dispassionately. Katy, who couldn't have taken the deaths of any of her crewmen so lightly, scowled at him. "The problem is rather more complex. The Empire is in a very delicate state. If we push too hard against Cottbus, we might discover that various other worlds will take it as a sign that we intend to be worse than the Empire and rebel, against us, the rebels. In fact…"

He spoke for nearly twenty minutes, leaving Katy feeling more confused than ever. "Are you telling me," she said, finally, "that we don't dare go after him because the rest of the Empire might rebel?"

"A crude, but accurate summation," Goscinny said. "Cottbus's declaration of independence puts us in a worrying legal position. If we move too quickly, we may find that we have only forced others…"

"They fired on us," Katy snapped. "We need to demand answers."

"And we will," Goscinny said. "I intend to push that forward as hard as possible. If Cottbus truly wishes to be regarded as an independent state, as they claim to do, they have committed an act of war and there will be retribution. If they still want to be part of the Empire, then they have to play the game by our rules, including acceptance of Parliament as the supreme authority within the Empire."

He shrugged. "The official position of Parliament is that the Empire is the supreme authority over humanity and that Cottbus, as a human-settled sector, is under its control," he concluded. "Unofficially, I have powers to negotiate a degree of autonomy for Cottbus, if there are satisfactory answers to our questions and even grant amnesty to any ex-Imperials living there. Does that answer your question?"

"Partly," Katy said. "It leads, however, to another point. Why did they destroy the cruisers?"

Goscinny blinked. "Their official explanation…"

“Is obvious tripe,” Katy said, not without a certain degree of relish. “Do you have a background in space warfare?” Goscinny shook his head. “Take it from me, then. They could not have engaged the cruisers successfully without luring them into a gravity shadow — which they did, apart from one which remained outside the gravity shadow and escaped when the shooting started. Why do that and risk provoking our wrath? Why even open fire when it was almost certain that one of the ships would escape anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Goscinny said. His voice was suspiciously even. “Why do you think they launched such an attack?”

Katy smiled. “The cruisers saw something they weren’t meant to see,” she said. “They saw something that Admiral Wilhelm, or whoever is really in charge in that sector, didn’t want us to see. They saw something so important that Admiral Wilhelm risked starting a second round of civil war by destroying our ships, just to prevent the word from getting out. The only question is what did the ships see?”

“Good point,” Goscinny said, finally. “Have you informed Colin?”

“Yes,” Katy said. She’d done more than that. She’d studied and analysed the records from the surviving cruiser carefully, looking for anything that was out of the ordinary. The only detail she had seen that was odd was that Admiral Wilhelm’s force looked to be in remarkably good shape for a sector fleet that hadn’t seen real combat for centuries. The Morrison Sector Fleet had degraded so much, according to Joshua, that it wouldn’t have been able to put up a real resistance before he arrived.

She smiled again as she stood up. “He told us to be careful.”

The hatch opened, allowing her to step back out into the starship’s corridors. Impulsively, she touched one of the bulkheads with her bare hands, feeling the thrumming power beating through the hull as the power plants came up to full readiness, charging the flicker drive for the flight to the first waypoint. The ship had only been commissioned for two months and it still had the indefinably *new* smell, but the two thousand crewers were pushing it away as they worked to get their ship ready for deployment.

She walked down the corridors, nodding absently to crewmen who saluted her as she passed, pausing long enough to check some of their work before moving onwards. The Captain would normally handle the inspection tour, although Katy intended to accompany him from time to time, and she had to be careful not to stand on his feet. The Imperial Navy had had plenty of Admirals who had made Captains passengers on their own ships, but the Shadow Fleet had tried to avoid it. It didn’t make for potential future flag officers.

The secure compartment had a pair of armed Marines in light body armour standing outside, their faces hidden behind blank masks

that would provide protection against almost all handheld weapons available to the crew. The Imperial Navy had rarely permitted its crews to carry and handle weapons, but the Shadow Fleet had taken a different view and the new Imperial Navy had copied that particular example. Katy wasn't sure she liked the concept, although she had to admit that it was slightly hypocritical, but it was generally a welcome change.

"You may enter," one of the Marines said, after checking her ID implants. If they hadn't confirmed her identity, they would have stunned her first and worried about asking questions later. Every superdreadnaught had a secure compartment, accessible only by a select group of people, and they tended to hold important and classified items, although she'd heard of a Captain who used his to store his collection of wine bottles. "Please remember to follow standard…"

Katy stepped into the airlock before he could finish. It sealed itself shut before the second airlock opened, revealing a small compartment with a handful of bunk beds, a pair of computer terminals and a set of battle armour. The two women and one man sitting on the bunks stood up as she entered, snapping into loose salutes, and Katy returned them, studying them with interest. It was the first time she had knowingly seen Imperial Intelligence's covert operatives.

"Admiral," the leader said. Her nametag read SASHA. Her voice was flat, almost emotionless. "Welcome to our lair."

Katy smiled. "You're welcome," she said, taking a moment to study Sasha and her comrades. Sasha herself was tall, blonde and looked more like a Freebooter than an Imperial Intelligence officer. Sandra was shorter, with an oriental face and long dark hair, while Charlie was tall and good-looking, in a bland way. He had the kind of face that a person could pass on the streets and instantly forget. The two girls would be remembered more for their appearances than anything more important. "I trust that you have been briefed on the mission?"

"We were told to report to you and follow your general orders," Sasha said. Her voice didn't change tone one iota. "The choice of exact method for carrying out your orders are to lie with us."

"I would not expect you to follow my precise instructions," Katy agreed. "How much do you know about the Cottbus Sector?"

Charlie tilted his head. "Twenty-three major star systems, nineteen minor star systems, fifty-two stars without any legal outpost or station above stage three," he said, as if he were reading it off a datapad. "The largest population within the sector is on Cottbus itself; four billion on-planet, two billion off-planet. The smallest population

is on…"

"All right, all right," Sasha said. She winked at Katy, as if she wasn't even aware of the difference in rank. "Give Charlie a question and he'll spend all day answering it."

"Forty major industrial nodes, including seven major shipyards," Charlie continued. "The largest shipyard is at Cottbus itself and is classed as a Type-I…"

"*Thank* you," Katy said, firmly. "As you may know, Ambassador Goscinny is going to be making open overtures to Cottbus in hopes of establishing exactly what is going on with them. Your task is to provide verification and attempt to discover just what is actually going on. I want intelligence on just how many worlds follow Admiral Wilhelm, how many ships he actually has and just what he's building in that shipyard."

Sasha smiled. "Is that all?"

Katy lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure that you can find that out without compromising yourselves?"

"It shouldn't be that difficult, at least in the beginning," Sasha assured her. "I take it that we'll be operating at Cottbus itself first?"

"It's the one target that Admiral Wilhelm has to defend," Katy said. "How do you plan to get into the system?"

"No offence," Sandra said, speaking for the first time, "but what you don't know, you can't be made to tell. We have some methods and technologies on our parasite ship that are so highly classified that I'm surprised that they allowed us to bring them along with you. We literally cannot discuss such things with anyone, but our immediate superiors."

Katy paused, considering. Sandra's voice was like liquid sex. She could have made a recital of annual missile usage statistics sound like an invitation to bed. If Katy had been more interested in the female sex, the effect would have been more dramatic, but even so, it pushed at her mind. And yet… she'd heard rumours, whispers, that Imperial Intelligence used mental techniques on its spies, techniques that would keep them loyal and burn their minds out if they were captured. She looked at the three agents, taking in their calm expressions, and knew that at least some of the rumours were true.

"I understand," she said, finally.

"We will formulate a plan of campaign," Sasha said. "Once we know how we intend to proceed, we will inform you of the bare bones of the plan and if you can assist us. The plan may require modification once we take a look at the ground, but until then…"

She shrugged. "We won't fail you, Admiral," she added. "We have never failed before."

"Understood," Katy said. She had heard that Imperial Intelligence

agents were *weird*, but rumour didn't come close to the reality. "Are you all right here, in this compartment?"

"Don't worry about it," Charlie said. "We've been in much more cramped spots than this. It's just a shame we can't tell you about them."

Katy consulted her timepiece. "We flicker out in an hour," she said. Suddenly, she couldn't wait to get away from them. "If you need me, call my communicator directly."

She left the compartment, accepted the salutes of the Marines, and started walking back towards the Flag Bridge, thinking hard. Colin — and Anderson, who had been a part of the conspiracy from the start — had told her that the Imperial Intelligence agents were strange, but expendable. She was used to going into battle with a starship wrapped around her, but they would be going into Cottbus with nothing, but their own wits to protect them. She didn't envy them in the slightest. If something went wrong, they would literally have no option, but suicide.

Her desktop processor had hundreds of reports on the state of the fleet and she skimmed through them, trusting her Captains to handle their tasks without much in the way of supervision. They might have been largely raw, but they'd had the best training the Shadow Fleet could provide, spiced up by a handful of veteran spacers. They'd worked overtime to identify and deal with any potential problems and, for once, they had all the supplies they needed and a fully-functional fleet train. Her 2nd Fleet wasn't the most powerful fleet that Colin and the rebels had mounted, but it was perhaps the most capable. They should be able to handle anything.

She just wished she felt confident. Had she really been so confident when she'd raided Paradise Rest and a dozen other worlds? What would happen when she faced combat again?

An hour later, the fleet flickered out and started on the long trip to Hawthorne.

Chapter Twelve

The guards hadn't been rough, or abusive, but they'd made their point quite clear. They escorted Lady Madeline Hohenzollern through the corridors of the massive command fortress, threatening her with their push-prods whenever she even looked like slowing, until they finally escorted her into a room. Stacy Roosevelt, behind her, had made the mistake of trying to fight and had been zapped by one of the prods. A guard carried her, slung over his shoulder, while her body remained limp and unmoving. A push-prod somehow — Madeline had never studied the principle — disabled the body's voluntary muscles for a short period of time, leaving Stacy completely helpless. The guards could do anything to her — to both of them — and they knew it.

She winced as they pushed her into a chair. The change had been so *sudden*! She'd been certain, of course, that Admiral Wilhelm was aware that he no longer needed them, but somehow she'd failed to consider the possible consequences. Her mind worked desperately to think of a way — some way, any way — that they could return to their ship and escape, but even if they succeeded, where would they go? There was nowhere that would welcome them, now, and Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't let them escape. They knew too much about his plans and the future to be allowed to leave.

Stacy moaned, but Madeline barely spared her a glance. She wasn't important any longer, not when bare survival itself was at stake… had it really only been seven months since she'd been at the High City, deciding the fate of the universe? The mighty, she reflected, had truly fallen… and if by some miracle she managed to escape, she could never return to the High City. The new administration would probably greet her and put her in front of a firing squad. Or, her mind gibbered, perhaps they would simply put her out an airlock and save themselves the cost of a firing squad. They certainly wouldn't be pleased to see her.

"Ahem," a voice said. She looked up to see Admiral Wilhelm, standing there, studying the pair of them. She had been so absolved in her own thoughts, trying desperately to think of some final stratagem to escape, that she hadn't even noticed him entering the room. "I trust that you are enjoying your new accommodation?"

Madeline managed to find a reserve of strength and glared at him. "What do you think you are doing?"

He lifted an eyebrow and it struck her, suddenly, that perhaps confrontation wasn't the best strategy. She no longer cared, really. There was no way they could escape the trap, not now. If he were

angry, perhaps he would have them both killed quickly. She ignored Stacy's snivelling — she hadn't been hurt at all in her life, until the rebels had taken her superdreadnaughts and turned her into a laughing stock — and focused on Wilhelm. Deciding that survival was no longer possible, she decided, was surprisingly liberating.

"I think I'm taking power for myself," he said, his voice surprisingly even. Anyone from the High City, she realised, would probably have taken the opportunity for a gloat, although Wilhelm had grown up in an environment where he had to learn control from a very early age. "I received a courier boat from Carola yesterday."

Madeline winced. Carola Wilhelm, the Admiral's ambitious wife, who was far smarter than most aristocrats had ever given her credit for. Between them, they were a dangerous combination, which was why she hadn't raised any objections when Wilhelm had sent her to Earth, but now she realised that it had been a mistake. Carola's loyalties were firmly with her husband… and, on Earth, she would have the perfect opportunity to serve him.

"She had quite a few interesting things to say about you," Wilhelm continued, and her heart sank. "For some reason, the pair of you are regarded as traitors, people who shunned both the new order and the old government. Your Families have disowned the pair of you, although there may never be another Roosevelt now" — he eyed Stacy, who said nothing — "and you are both… surplus to requirements. I don't need you any longer and there is no one back on Earth I can offer you too… so why should I keep you alive?"

"You can't do this to us," Stacy protested. She'd managed to regain enough control to speak, although her words were oddly slurred. "The Roosevelt Clan will seek revenge for my death…"

"The Roosevelt Clan no longer exists," Wilhelm reminded her. "Haven't you been listening? The core of the Roosevelt Family is trying desperately to ally with other Families, just to keep some part of the name alive. The other Families that you brought into your Clan have snapped all ties and are frantically pretending that they had nothing to do with you, just to avoid paying some of your debts. There is *no one* who cares what happens to you, either of you."

He turned back to Madeline and smiled, darkly. "They seem not to have quite accepted our declaration of independence," he continued. "They're sending quite a large fleet out here, enough ships to crush the Sector Fleet — if that was all they were going to be facing, but its not, is it?"

Madeline composed herself. "And the other Admirals?" She asked, carefully. "How do you intend to divide up the Empire between the four of you?"

"The same way you did, back when you founded your Empire,"

Wilhelm said. “We will become the next set of Families, after having destroyed the rebellion and the old set of Families, of course. We won’t waste time bickering over the future once we’ve scored a victory, but we will press the victory right to the bitter end. If you’d supported Admiral Wachter to the hilt, you would never have lost Earth.”

He leaned forward. “And we won’t make the same mistake,” he continued. “We will retake Earth after destroying the rebel fleet and impose our own order on the Empire.”

“You won’t succeed,” Madeline said, icily. “How do you intend to run the Empire without us?”

“The same way I arranged the shipyards here,” Wilhelm said, dryly. “I placed them in the hands of their workers, rather than the mangers you appointed, and productivity skyrocketed. Do you have any idea how many innovative ideas were just ignored because they didn’t come from the right person? If I promote on merit, rather than connections, or the ability to hide their real feelings… and, most important of all, I remove the Family influence, what can’t they do?”

He leaned forward. “That’s the problem the rebels have, now,” he said. “I won’t have that problem.”

“Fine,” Madeline said, angrily. “You’ve won. Well done. What now?”

“You’re going to kill us,” Stacy said, in a small voice. Perhaps, Madeline decided, the reality of the situation had finally gotten through to her. “What did we ever do to you?”

Wilhelm stared at her. “You forced me and others to hide what we were behind a dumb mask, swallowing your insults and taunts, denied the positions we could reach through talent because you didn’t trust us,” he said, very coldly. “Do you have any right to be surprised when we prove you right and turn on you?”

Madeline met his eyes. “Do you have to gloat?”

“I spent years planning what I would say to you and the others like you if I ever had the chance,” Wilhelm said, calmly. “Why should I *not* gloat?” He leaned back from her and stood up. “The rebels are, understandably, a little irritated about the destruction of their ships. I think that you two might make suitable scapegoats, don’t you?”

He looked over at the guards. “Take them away to the special cells,” he ordered. “Put them in together, but otherwise completely isolated. We wouldn’t want them talking to anyone else until we were ready to deal with them properly, would we?”

Madeline stood with icy dignity and allowed the guard to lead her out of the room, holding Stacy’s arm with one hand. Wilhelm had kept them alive — or seemed to have decided to keep them alive for now — and she tried to convince herself that it was a mistake. If he

handed them over to the rebels, alive, they could tell them everything… and so they wouldn't be handed over alive. There would be an 'accident' before the rebels demanded to see them, if they ever did. They were alone.

The special cell was every bit as bad as she had imagined. It was a tiny box, barely large enough for them both to stand up in, dark and grimy, without even graffiti on the walls. Stacy had retreated completely inside herself, perhaps seeking the safety of madness, but Madeline refused to allow herself to go the same way. While there was life, there was hope… perhaps.

* * *

Admiral Wilhelm watched the two aristocratic bitches being escorted away and felt curiously numb. He hadn't lied when he'd told Madeline that he'd dreamed of the day when he could spit in the collective eyes of the Thousand Families, but now the moment had come, he felt oddly conflicted. He hadn't realised just how weak the Empire actually was, although he was honest enough to admit that he'd seen the signs, but he hadn't read them correctly. As a person on the fringes of high society, married to a smart and brilliant woman — and with all the luxuries of his position — he hadn't really had an incentive to rebel. Trying and failing would have meant the loss of the luxuries, the power, the… well, everything, really. He would have been executed, along with his wife and the remainder of his family, *pour encourager les autues*.

And a mere Commander starts a revolt that set the galaxy on fire, he thought, as he stepped out of the hatch and headed up towards his personal quarters. One advantage of having spent ten years effectively running a sector was that he had managed to identity and eliminate most of Imperial Intelligence's spies, although he knew that nothing was ever certain where Imperial Intelligence was concerned. They might well have managed to sneak a handful through his precautions, even though he would have preferred to believe otherwise, and a single spy in the wrong place could be disastrous. It helped that Earth itself had fallen. Any spies left in his command would probably be wondering just who they should be reporting to these days.

He reached his quarters, accepted the salute from the Marine guarding the hatch, and stepped inside. There were signs of Carola's presence everywhere, from the handful of tasteful paintings to the small collection of pre-space novels — forbidden to anyone without a special licence — on one wall and he felt a sudden pang of sorrow that she was gone. Their marriage had lasted far longer than anyone

had expected — anti-aging treatments had ensured that most marriages eventually ended in divorce — but now he missed her. There was no one else he could send to Earth, no one else who could be trusted to represent his interests only, but the price was high. They'd always been honest with each other and he depended on her advice more than he liked to admit.

A muttered command brought up a strategic display of the sector and he considered it thoughtfully. It had been a fairly simple task, with the command and authorisation codes he'd had as part of his role as Sector Fleet Commander, to take over every defence system and starship in the sector. Where Colin Harper had had to cruise around, picking his fights carefully, he had simply been able to take the defences over and recruit people to follow him. It hadn't been that hard. The resentment among the rank and file for the Thousand Families might have been carefully hidden, but it was strong enough to move mountains. He had no shortage of recruits.

But in the end, it was a losing posture if it came down to a war. He was sure of that. The rebels would have to fight him, sooner or later, or accept that the Empire was going to fall apart. They would bring their fleet to bear on the Cottbus Sector and it would melt away… unless he changed the parameters. He had the support of three other sectors, and more. The rebels didn't know it, but they'd already been betrayed.

He keyed a command into his private terminal and waited until three holograms took on shape and form. Admiral Wolfsan was a short bearded man, with dark hair and a fixed grimace. Admiral Li Chang was tall and very oriental, with a china doll face and very long dark hair. She was a striking beauty and had, rumour suggested, exhausted four patrons to reach her current post. Admiral Madison was tall and very thin, with white hair and an air of patient dignity. He'd been pushed down so hard by the representatives of the Thousand Families that when he'd had a chance to rebel, he'd had the representatives tortured to death, just for starters. He was possibly the most ruthless person Wilhelm had ever met and he included himself among that number. If there were ever going to be a challenge, he would bet every credit in his account that it would come from Admiral Madison.

"You have taken the time, I assume, to assimilate the information from Earth," he said. It wasn't a question. He'd forwarded them all a copy of Carola's message. Her agents had been busy on Earth and, even though the rebels had a stronger concept of security than the Thousand Families, had located enough information to allow them to plan out the next campaign. "Do you see any requirement for altering the first stage of our plan?"

There was a brief burst of chatter. They'd been sold on the

concept of a joint offensive because none of them had the strength to strike alone, not against the rebels, but the plan had entailed some risks. The rebels didn't know it, but almost every capital ship belonging to the four Admirals had been gathered near Cottbus, a bare light year from the star. They were completely beyond detection range and waiting for the chance to strike. The cruisers he'd destroyed had had no idea they were there.

His plan was simple enough. Interstellar warfare obeyed the KISS principle — Keep It Simple, Stupid — and relied on certain points. The rebels *had* to come to Cottbus. They had little choice, unless they intended to accept him as an independent player… and they wouldn't do that. He certainly wouldn't in their place. They would come, with the fleet they were dispatching — *would have* dispatched by now — to Cottbus… and he would meet them with overwhelmingly superior firepower. Even if they escaped — it was hard to pull off an ambush when the flicker drive existed — their confidence would take a beating. He already had the series of strikes planned that would drive on Earth and destroy the Provisional Government before they could react to the new realities.

And then the whole Empire would be at their feet, forever.

"I see little requirement for a change," Li said, finally. Her voice was as seductive as the rest of her. "If we alter our plans now, we run the risk of confusing our people for little gain. We should not run the risk of attacking Hawthorn until after their main fleet has been destroyed."

"I remind unconvinced that we should go after Hawthorn," Admiral Madison said, his cold voice sending shivers down Wilhelm's spine. He was surprised that Admiral Madison had been allowed to remain in command. He had no weaknesses — no drink, no drugs, few if any women or men in his life — and Imperial Intelligence disliked commanders who didn't have weaknesses. "There is little point in tying down our forces for a siege or taking the base directly when it lacks the ability to threaten us."

Wilhelm scowled. Hawthorn was a problem, the largest Imperial Navy base close to his sector… and, unfortunately, occupied by the rebels before he could make a grab for it himself. It wasn't anything like as well-equipped as Cottbus — it hadn't had a strong patron — but it would serve as the base for a major fleet deployment, if allowed to remain in rebel hands. On the other hand, it didn't have any major shipyards and if they destroyed the mobile units, the world became irrelevant.

"We can leave that for the moment," he said, drawing back the display. There was a single bunch of first-rank worlds… and then the core itself. "The main priority is destroying the rebel fleet."

Li smiled. It was a beautiful and yet somehow chilling sight. “We have been training our people since we took over,” she said. “We can best the rebels at their own game, Markus, and crush their fleet.”

“I think so,” Wilhelm said. He looked around the room. “We may expect the rebels at any time a week from now. I expect all of you to be ready to engage them when they arrive.”

He smiled as their images flickered out, one by one, replaced by a very different shape. He hadn’t believed the newcomer when he had first arrived, but the offer was too good to pass up, whatever the dangers. The technology alone had been worthwhile, but the intelligence had been worth its weight in gold.

“And you?” Wilhelm asked. That section of the plan was one that he regarded as dangerously chancy. “Are you confident in your people?”

“Of course,” the Nerd said. He was a strangely inhuman form. Unlike the Geeks, their cousins, the Nerds generally went in for biological enhancement. The Nerd’s head was larger and more fragile than a baseline human’s head. They claimed that they thought twice as fast as any normal human. The sight was still somehow an unpleasant one. “They will carry out their tasks or die trying.”

Chapter Thirteen

"The bottom line," Kathy said, "is that the Empire is effectively bankrupt."

Colin stared at her. "Bankrupt?" He said, astonished. "How… but Percival was always bragging about how rich his Family was."

"A cunning tissue of lies and deceits," Kathy said, grimly. "I've been working on the financial survey of the Empire for the last few months, ever since you appointed me to this role, and we have finally completed the general survey of the core worlds and the inner sectors. The problem is that for every star system that is a net gain, we have at least five that are drains on our economy, at least as they were established under the Empire. They're simply not contributing anything important to us, financially speaking."

She paused. "I don't know if the Families knew just how bad the situation was, but we certainly had a hand in sparking off the entire crisis," she continued. "When Roosevelt went bust, it forced the other Families to overstretch their own resources to prevent further disasters, but that naturally weakened their own positions. Worse, very few worlds are paying their taxes and tithes at the moment, which means that we have a shortfall and — even worse — some of the payments the Empire was making to various worlds are still going ahead."

Colin rubbed his forehead. "Why?" He asked. "Why was the Empire paying them anything?"

Kathy winced. It had taken several weeks to establish the answer and it wasn't one she liked. "The Families founded the worlds as colonies and invested heavily in them, both to build up additional industry and to prevent them from paying off their debts and taking their place among the first-rank worlds," she said. Very few planets had made the leap to first-rank status. The game had been rigged to make that almost impossible. They spent centuries paying off the interest on their debts alone. "They were therefore able to force the combined treasury to fund some of the development, claiming that it was vitally important."

She shook her head. "There are too many different cases for me to come up with a general rule," she concluded. "The bottom line is that we don't have anything like the financial resources we thought we had and that we're not going to be able to improve the situation anytime soon."

"Headache now," Colin said, dryly. Kathy nodded in sympathy. She had spent weeks untangling the complex lines of finance and responsibility that ran through the Empire, only to discover that the

Empire had been gravely mismanaged. She couldn't say that she was surprised, but she couldn't understand why the Thousand Families had let the situation get so far out of hand. How could they have been ignorant of what they were doing? "Why the hell are we even still paying these… monies?"

"The Empire's vast bureaucracy kept paying them even though we'd taken over the High City," Kathy explained, reluctantly. There were literally billions of bureaucrats in the Empire and their combined inertia was incredible. The role hadn't attracted intelligent and honest men, but unimaginative and outright corrupt men and women. The ones who weren't skimming themselves bonuses from the top were just carrying out their orders as literally as possible, even if the reason for those orders no longer applied. After all, they might get in trouble if they followed orders, but they would *certainly* get in trouble if they didn't follow orders, even if the orders were mistaken.

She shook her head. "In the meantime, the 'no taxation without representation' meme seems to have caught on everywhere," she continued. "We have colonies refusing to pay taxes unless we make one concession or another, or colonies that have seized their infrastructure and demanding that we recognise that before anything else is discussed, or… and the speed of communication doesn't make it any easy. The knock-on effects are shaking the Empire to pieces, slowly, but very surely."

Colin winced. "And there I was worried about Admiral Wilhelm," he said. "How do we tackle this problem?"

"Carefully," Kathy said. "If we take harsh action, we will only make the situation worse."

"I think that life was easier if we didn't care if we broke it or not," Colin said. Kathy had to agree. They'd fought the Empire, but now they were running the Empire they had to maintain it; it was the basis of their power and legitimacy, such as it was. A mass secessionist movement, or even hundreds of worlds demanding special treatment and rights, would be disastrous, yet anything overt they did to prevent it would be almost as bad. The Empire had created a system for sucking thousands of worlds dry, but the Provisional Government had broken the system and rebuilding it, now, would be impossible. "How do you intend to approach it?"

"First, I intend to limit all further payments," Kathy said, firmly. "In effect, all parties will have to reapply for them, which will give us a chance to see what is actually needed and what is merely… someone attempting to exploit us. They'll have to present their case here, at the High City, and we can judge them on a case-by-case basis.

"Second, I propose to legalise the seizure of the industries," she continued. "It won't go down well with the remains of the Families,

but unless we're prepared to use military force to retake and run them, we can't recover them anyway. That will allow them to be brought back into the Empire's overall industrial potential and, just incidentally, push them into producing small craft for their own defence."

Colin frowned. "A case could be made that that was a breech of the surrender agreement," he pointed out. "Do you really feel that that it necessary?"

"We don't have many options," Kathy said, grimly. "The Thousand Families may have built and exploited the industries, but it wasn't the Families who ran them. They preferred to leave that to massive workforces who were paid very little and treated with extreme brutality if they attempted to unionise. Now, they're seizing the workplaces with the concurrence of local authorities and… we can't do anything about it. We may as well accept it."

"Tiberius will definitely not be happy," Colin said. Kathy nodded, but held her ground. "Very well. And the third?"

"I intend to put out as many contracts as possible to the new firms and companies," Kathy concluded. "They will be paying taxes to the Empire, if they succeed, and I intend to force them into proper competition. The Thousand Families used to keep the shipping lines sewn up as tight as possible, but now there will be others, including the Freebooters."

Colin smiled. "Daria will be happy about that," he said. "Recognition at last."

Kathy nodded. She rather like Daria, although she had the odd nagging feeling that she'd known Daria some time before, even though she had never seen her in her life before she'd been transported to Patrick's Asteroid. The Freebooters had been pushing their way into areas once dominated by the Family-owned shipping lines, aided and abetted by starship crews deserting the Families and signing up with the Freebooters, and prices were falling everywhere. If the pirates could be beaten — and very few pirates would dare to tangle with the Freebooters — the Empire might be on the verge of an economic renaissance, if they could hold out long enough.

"Yes," she agreed. "I think that if we hang on and stanch most of the bleeding, we should be able to save the Empire from complete collapse. The worst problem, however, is that we may no longer be able to afford the starship construction program."

"We can't lower our guard, not now," Colin said, slowly. "Admiral Wilhelm alone is a serious problem, Kathy, and there are rumours of other warlords out along the Rim."

"I know," Kathy said. "The figures, however, don't lie. If we carry on the current construction program, we will be unable to continue it

past four months, unless something changes radically. The Empire never produced many superdreadnaughts for precisely that reason. If you think about it" — she was vaguely aware that she was teaching her grandmother to suck eggs — "the Imperial Navy should have been several times its pre-war size, but…"

"I'll think about it," Colin promised, holding up a hand. "Now, have you considered my proposals for the future government of the Empire?"

Kathy nodded. Colin had proposed, with support from most of his inner circle, a federal structure, devolving local autonomy down on every inhabited world, provided they honoured the Empire's control over interstellar affairs. The rule of law, as Colin had explained it, would govern the Empire. There would no longer be massive abuses of power by the Thousand Families, or even Parliament itself.

"I only have one concern," Kathy said. "We need to make it clear that Imperial Law governs all commercial activity. Far too many of our current problems stem from planets and governments refusing to pay their debts, rightly or wrongly, and we cannot allow that to continue. We will have to be prepared to sanction anyone who breaks interstellar law."

Colin nodded. The Empire had had a nasty habit of luring entire worlds into debt-peonage, with thousands of descendents scrabbling to pay off debts incurred by their ancestors, debts that were carefully organised to make it impossible for them to escape. Imperial Law had backed the Families — of course — and anyone who defaulted had had to face the SD Troopers. Very few had dared to rebel, but now that the SD threat had been removed they were refuting their debts and trying to stand on their own. Kathy couldn't blame them — and she felt that it would be morally wrong to force them to continue to pay when the original debts had been paid back long ago — but it was just another nail in the Empire's coffin.

"We will," Colin promised. He leaned forward. "And the alien provisions?"

Kathy nodded slowly. After weeks and months of debate, Colin was finally pushing the alien question through Parliament, asking them to remove the Imperial yoke from their worlds and allow them to develop in peace, without further interference from the human race. Some of them, who lived where no human could live safely, would even be allowed to colonise and spread their seed across the Empire. It was the most controversial package in Parliament's history and bets were already being laid as to the results. The pundits were expecting blood on the walls and riots in the streets.

They might have had a point. Kathy was aware, from her own work, just how anti-alien the vast majority of the human population

actually was, even though few of them would have *met* an alien. Public Information had been spreading horror stories about the alien menace ever since the Empire had been founded, accusing them of everything from cannibalism to attempted genocide, encouraging hatred for the *different*. An investigative reporter, after the Fall of Earth, had concluded that Public Information had lied repeatedly — although *that* wasn't a surprise — and had actually manufactured several alien threats. The human race knew eight living alien races, but Public Information, never ones to let the truth get in the way of a good story, had invented three more, monstrous creatures intent on eating their way through the human worlds. They had found images in old human entertainment programs and given them a reality all of their own.

"The alien worlds add very little to our overall economy," Kathy said. "The Rock-Monsters help some mining efforts, but others have little to do with the Empire. I suspect that we would be fine if we abandoned their worlds. As long as we don't pledge ourselves to help them rebuild their economies or anything, we should be fine if we just abandoned them."

Colin frowned. "And if we did help them?"

"It would be a strain," Kathy said. She frowned. She rarely offered political advice, but this was important. "It would also be very unpopular."

"God damn it," Colin said, suddenly. The frustration in his voice made Kathy blink. "Why is doing the right thing so hard?"

"Because most people don't think that it is the right thing," Kathy said, slowly. "The process of re-educating them is going to take centuries, literally, and we don't have the time to do it for every man, woman and child in the Empire. I think its one of the problems that just has to be dealt with, the sooner the better."

"I know," Colin said. "I intend to introduce the bill within a week and then withdraw the remaining garrisons within a month. We'll keep an eye on the aliens, just in case, but overall we won't have anything further to do with them. How does that sound?"

"I'm not the one you have to convince," Kathy said. "I can provide expert economic testimony if you would like, but…"

"I know," Colin said. "There are times when I wish I could just throw the whole Empire aside and leave."

"That would condemn billions to death," Kathy said. She leaned forward. She had never been that close to Colin, but she liked and respected him, enough to want to help him. "Give it a year, maybe two, and the entire Empire will have been reformed. The process will be unstoppable. Isn't that worth fighting for?"

* * *

Kathy wasn't entirely surprised to see the aircar waiting for her when she came out of the Parliament building, passing the Marine guards and stepping down into the streets. Jason Cordova had said that he would try to come and meet her, but as he'd been working on Earth's massive defence network, there had been no promises. Kathy had learned to accept that part of their relationship, even though it dragged. When one of them was free, the other might be halfway across the system.

Perhaps we need a holiday as well, she thought, as she reached the aircar… and stopped dead. It wasn't Cordova. Gwendolyn Cicero looked up as the hatch hissed open and smiled at her, crossing her long legs and leaning back to show off her perfect body. It would have been an alluring sight under other circumstances, but Kathy was too annoyed to care. She had been looking forward to seeing Cordova again.

"Come on in," Gwendolyn said. Her voice was as perfect as Kathy remembered. "The water is fine, you know."

Kathy didn't smile. She had known Gwendolyn from her days before she'd left Earth to try to find her Family's fortune. Gwendolyn was smart and heartbreakingly pretty, but she was also one of the social queens who had made her life hell. She was over fifty years old, but she looked barely of legal age, even in the Empire. Their paths hadn't crossed since her departure — she hadn't met Gwendolyn when she'd come to Harmony as an Ambassador from the Cicero Clan — and she wasn't pleased to meet her now. In her view, Gwendolyn represented everything that was wrong about the Thousand Families.

"Is it?" She said, as she stepped into the cab. The meeting wasn't a coincidence. Gwendolyn had gone to some effort to ensure that she met Kathy… and it wouldn't be for anything mundane. They could have spoken over the communications network for something as simple as a party invitation. Kathy decided to be blunt. "What do you want?"

The aircar, at a muttered command from Gwendolyn, rose up into the air and set course for Kathy's small house. "Nothing, really," Gwendolyn said, calmly. Kathy didn't believe her for a minute. No one would go to so much effort unless they had an ulterior motive. "I was merely wondering if you intend to attend the wedding of Tiberius and Alicia?"

Kathy almost smiled at the scorn in Gwendolyn's voice. It was no secret that Gwendolyn thought that *she* should have been the Cicero — it was a fairly common delusion among the second-tier aristocrats — and her dislike of her superior was obvious. It was also

unbelievable. The decision to come to meet her wasn't something that fitted her question.

"I have been invited," Kathy said. She would have preferred not to attend — she disliked social occasions because of all the backbiting, led by people like Gwendolyn — but Tiberius had invited her personally and that made it almost impossible to decline. "I think I might be attending."

"How wonderful," Gwendolyn gushed. Kathy eyed her suspiciously. "Perhaps a blend of silks and satins…"

"Perhaps you should stop the game and tell me what you want," Kathy snapped, running out of patience. "I don't believe that you came here merely to question my dress sense."

"Well, we wouldn't want a repeat of the catfight between Lady Elysium and Lady Ayasia, would we?" Gwendolyn asked. Kathy had to smile. The two snobs had both purchased the same dress from an exclusive fashion designer. "That was very disruptive…"

"And the *real* reason?"

"It's quite simple," Gwendolyn said. "I have been asked by Ambassador Wilhelm to arrange a meeting between her and you, concerning — I believe — trade deals between the Empire and the *independent* state of Cottbus. Would you like to meet her?"

Kathy stared at her. She'd seen Carola in Parliament, but she agreed with Colin; they needed some answers about what was actually going on in Cottbus before they actually made any decisions about it's future. Gwendolyn shouldn't have had any ties to Cottbus at all and she wondered, vaguely, if it was some kind of power play.

"No," she said, finally. Her house was just coming into view and the aircar began its descent. "I'm not interested."

The aircar settled neatly on the ground. "Are you sure?" Gwendolyn asked, coldly. "You're in a very exposed position…"

Kathy rounded on her. "I am part of the Provisional Government," she snapped. "If anyone is in an exposed position, it's you!"

She climbed out of the aircar and walked quickly up the path to the door, aware of Gwendolyn's eyes following her until she opened the door and entered the house. If she was actually dealing with Carola…

I have to discuss this with Jason, she thought, grimly. *This changes everything.*

Chapter Fourteen

There were some who said that the entire Hawthorn System was an artefact, created by supremely power aliens thousands of years ago… and, looking at the system as the 2nd Fleet flickered into existence, Katy could almost believe it. The planets were maintained in unnaturally regular orbits, orbiting in a formation that suggested a long chain of beads, somehow perfectly placed to remain in a line. The outermost planet, a gas giant with its own series of moons, moved around the parent star far faster than the inner worlds, and yet it too maintained its position. It was almost a work of art… and the highly-classified papers Katy had read when she'd been assigned to the system suggested that that was exactly what it was.

The Empire had been reluctant to admit the possibility of far more advanced aliens and had created a scientific theory to explain that perfect orbits, in perfect lines, were possible, if very unlikely. Katy, who'd seen more star systems than the average traveller, was inclined to doubt the logic. The random effects of planets, jostling each other for supremacy, didn't lead to perfect orbits, although most orbits were fairly stable. The Hawthorn System was just too perfect. It was also one of the most interesting systems to navigate. The gravity shadow literally stretched from the star to the outermost world, and, as it moved with the planets in their orbit, it produced a significant threat to anyone without up-to-date charts. Katy had ordered the fleet to come out of flicker-space above the plane of the system — the plane was perfect, naturally — just to make certain that they had accurate charts. A mistake would have been disastrous.

"The charts were fairly accurate," the helmsman confirmed, finally. Gravity moved through space faster than light — unfortunately, despite considerable theoretical work, no one had managed to find a way to translate that into a viable faster-than-light communications system — and confirming the location of the planets was easy. It was far less easy to confirm the presence of starships or defence fortresses. Very few of humanity's constructions in space were large enough to generate a gravity shadow of their own. "There are odd gravity fluctuations around the worlds, however."

"Interesting," Katy said, as the display updated. The fluctuations seemed to run from the star out to the outermost world, and then back again in a surprisingly regular pattern. There were, she'd been told, hundreds of scientists studying the fluctuations, trying to decipher their cause and meaning. One theory was that they were an interstellar communications system, although no one had ever detected a reply. "Adjust our course for Hawthorn and flicker us out

when you're ready."

"Yes, Admiral," the helmsman said. Space twisted around them and Katy winced, even though the transition shock was a lot smoother than on a smaller starship. "We have arrived at the edge of the gravity shadow."

Katy looked over at the tactical officer. "The defences remain intact and IFF signals correspond perfectly to the recorded signals, including the emergency signals from Admiral Goodwin," she said, calmly. "The only starships within sensor range have been identified as ships assigned to the Sector Fleet."

"Good," Katy said. Hawthorn had been stripped bare during the later stages of the rebellion. The Imperial Navy had dispatched everything they could in hopes of stemming Colin's advance, even though some of the ships had mutinied once they'd left the system. Not all of them had made it to the Shadow Fleet, but those that had had been warmly welcomed. Hawthorn's weakness had been a persistent worry, despite the massive defences; Admiral Wilhelm could have jumped Admiral Goodwin at any time. She was rather surprised that the Empire retained control the system.

Perhaps he still hopes that we will recognise his independence and forget about the cruisers he destroyed, she thought, coldly. Goscinny had made that point quite clear. The Empire might, in the interests of not having to fight another war so quickly, decide that the cruisers had been expendable, after all. Katy hated that logic, even though she couldn't dispute it, for it sent the wrong message to other warlords. Punching out Cottbus, she felt, would be much more effective.

"Tie us into the system command network and inform me if there are any changes," she ordered, as she stood up. She suspected that Admiral Wilhelm already knew that her fleet was on the way — his wife and ambassador could have sent him a message — and not flying straight into an ambush was an encouraging sign. "Communications, I want to receive a full report from each and every starship regarding their training progress and inform them that we will be holding a drill tomorrow."

She left the bridge and walked quickly down to her cabin. As she had expected, Goscinny was waiting for her there, making small talk with the pair of Marine guards. Katy received their salutes, opened the hatch, and invited Goscinny into the room.

"No surprises, then?" Goscinny asked, as he took a chair without being invited to sit. He was an interesting conversationalist, Katy had discovered, but he could also be blatantly unfamiliar with military protocol. "Admiral Goodwin is still in charge and all is well?"

"It seems that way," Katy agreed, tapping her terminal and requesting a secure link to Admiral Goodwin. They were, technically,

equals, but under the old order he would have been her superior. Admiral Goodwin didn't have a bad reputation — and nor, she remembered, did Admiral Wilhelm — but he had little in the way of imagination. He would be fine as long as he didn't actually have a crisis to deal with. A safe pair of hands for an Imperial Navy base, in other words. "One moment…"

Admiral Goodwin's face materialised in front of them. He was a short, balding man, with a slightly chubby face and body. He could have had both of those conditions corrected with ease, in any medical lab, and choosing to keep both of them suggested either supreme self-confidence or a sheer lack of concern about appearances. It made a pleasant change. In Katy's experience, most men who had access to cosmetic technology gave themselves the bodies of Greek Gods, with the sexual stamina to match. It spoke volumes about their insecurities.

"Admiral," he said, without preamble. "I can't say how glad I am that you're here."

Katy felt her eyes narrow. "Has the situation changed?"

"We've been probed, from time to time, by unknown starships," Admiral Goodwin said. There was a nervous note in his voice. "I attempted to order intercepts, but none of my starships were able to get close enough to positively identify or engage the intruders. I have a nasty feeling that someone is picketing the system in preparation for an attack."

And has just seen my fleet arrive, Katy thought coldly. "I see," she said. "And has there been any change from Cottbus itself?"

"Very little," Admiral Goodwin said. His voice darkened. "I had several hundred merchant crews interviewed after visiting the sector, but they couldn't say much beyond the fact that the former government seems to have vanished, the military seems to be in full control and control over the industries has been passed to the workers. A handful of other crews went into the system and never came out again, as far as we can tell…"

Katy nodded. It wasn't that easy to keep track of commercial shipping at the best of times, even at the heart of the Empire, for merchant skippers seemed to take an unholy delight in confounding the Imperial Navy and the taxmen. Not that she blamed them for the latter, of course; the taxman was the enemy of all independent skippers. The independents also didn't care about the standard sector lines and crossed them freely; the missing ships might have remained in the sector, or even crossed it and headed into the next sector. It could be years before a missing starship was declared 'missing, presumed destroyed,' and it wasn't uncommon for ships to be declared lost in error.

"We don't know exactly what's been going on, but we do know

that representatives from Cottbus have been signing deals with everyone in sight, including half of the new companies operating within the sector," Admiral Goodwin continued. "I don't have authority to interfere with them unless they break Imperial Law and so far they have merely agreed to assist in the exploitation of the sector. There's a great deal of money involved and everyone is grasping at it."

Goscinny leaned forward. "Have you heard anything political from the sector?"

"Nothing," Admiral Goodwin said. "As per my orders, I haven't probed the sector with any light units, so I don't know exactly what is going on within the sector. I assume that you have new orders from Earth?"

Katy had to smile. The concept of the rebellion was clearly beyond Goodwin, so he had decided that orders from Earth were legal, regardless of who was actually issuing the orders. He was probably hoping that whoever came out on top wouldn't want to remove him, as long as he didn't do anything that would be regarded as a treacherous act. It wasn't a position she envied him, but at least it had the virtue of simplicity.

"We are going to confront Admiral Wilhelm and demand explanations," Goscinny said, firmly. "He will be unable to avoid taking notice of this entire fleet when it arrives at Cottbus and we can negotiate from a position of strength. Once we know what's going on, we can deal with him."

"I see," Admiral Goodwin said. "And what, exactly, is the anticipated outcome?"

"We may offer Cottbus the same status as a first-rank world, although the concept has never been extended to an entire sector," Goscinny said. "Complete independence is not an acceptable outcome. The unity of the human race remains our first priority."

"I hope you manage to convince *him* of that," Admiral Goodwin said. "There are no superdreadnaughts here, Admiral Garland; the largest ship under my command is a battlecruiser. If Admiral Wilhelm comes knocking, this world will not hold out for long."

Katy nodded. The Geeks had invented all kinds of weapons to make battering away at a planet's defences easier… and while most of them could be countered, Hawthorn's defences simply hadn't been a priority. No one knew just how many of the new weapons Admiral Wilhelm had, but he would almost certainly have sensor data, perhaps even from the Fall of Earth…

And if he has those missing four squadrons of superdreadnaughts, we're going to be outgunned, she thought coldly. *It might be time to start thinking about contingency plans.*

* * *

"I intend to take the fleet through a week's worth of exercises in deep space before I head to Cottbus," Katy said, two hours later. The decision hadn't been an easy one, but she was ruefully aware that her fleet wasn't drilled to perfection yet. If the system was being picketed, and she would have been more surprised if it *wasn't* being picketed, she couldn't allow Admiral Wilhelm to realise just how unprepared her fleet actually was. It meant tempt him to do something stupid. "That gives you a week to get into the system and learn what you can."

"We've worked under tighter deadlines," Sasha assured her, from her relaxed position on the bunk. Katy chose not to speculate on what the three of them might be doing when they weren't actually on a mission. Their mere presence was supposed to be a secret, even to most of her senior crew. "We watched your discussion with Admiral Goodwin. If Admiral Wilhelm is indeed picketing this system, it probably doesn't bode well for the future."

"Particularly as it would be fairly straightforward to picket the system without tipping off the defenders," Charlie added, from where he was working on a suit of light combat armour. "There are any number of ways to slip a picket destroyer or a set of recon platforms into an inhabited system, regardless of the actual level of sensor platforms in the area. They *wanted* those ships to be detected."

"I had concluded as much," Katy said. There was something refreshing about their attitude, even if they were probably pushing the limits of insubordination. "That leads to yet another question, of course. Why?"

"We do seem to have more questions than answers," Sasha agreed. Her voice was as cold and dispassionate as ever. "The most logical answer is that it is intended as a move in a war of nerves."

She stood up in one smooth motion and started to pace the confined space. "There's little point in picketing a system openly unless you intend to attack almost at once, because you would tip off the defenders and force them to redeploy, which would render most of the data you collected invalid," she said, thoughtfully. "No attack has materialised, obviously, so we have two options; the attacks were called off because they didn't see an opening, or they never intended to attack at all."

"Or their actual target wasn't here," Sandra injected. "They may have seriously considered jumping the fleet once it arrived."

"Which won't help them unless they have a strike force within range," Charlie said. "It's a week between Hawthorn and Cottbus, so they would have to depart from here and race to Cottbus, unless they

stripped Cottbus bare…"

"Impossible to know, one way or the other," Sasha said, firmly. "I suspect that the Admiral intended to keep Admiral Goodwin on edge and disinclined to launch any adventures of his own, while reminding him of the cost of a war. Even if victory were certain if it came down to a fight, the cost would still be enormous — and the Empire cannot afford it. He may be calculating that the Empire would prefer to give him what he wants rather than pay the price for squashing him like a bug."

She shrugged. "That's not our problem at the moment," she continued, changing the subject. "Our problem is slipping into Cottbus and finding out just what the fuck is going on, nothing else." She looked up at Katy as she settled back down onto a bunk. "I have reviewed the data gathered by the merchant skippers. Reaching Cottbus itself shouldn't be a problem, not with the cargo we're carrying, and we should have no difficulty finding a buyer. Once we get there, we can get settled in and find a source of information."

"Of course," Charlie said dryly. "Once Sandra gets to work on a mark, they'll give up everything and come back pleading for more."

"Bastard," Sandra said. She picked a shoe off the deck and threw it neatly at him, but Charlie caught it out of the air without looking at it. "Don't worry, Admiral. We'll find out what you need to know, before it's too late."

"Thank you," Katy said, dryly. She had faith in Anderson, if not in his three agents and their plans. "Is there anything you need from the fleet?"

The three agents shared a long look. "I doubt it," Sasha said finally. "We just need to slip up to the ship and disembark from your ship, without being noticed. We'll cloak in the hanger bay and drift out to a safe distance once the *Jefferson* is outside the gravity shadow before we vanish. The pickets won't even catch a sniff of us."

"They better hadn't," Charlie said grimly, "or this entire scheme will be worse than useless. A sensor record that places us close to your ships will be far too revealing."

Katy checked her timepiece. "We're going to launch for the exercise this afternoon," she said. "I assume that you can be ready to depart by that time?"

"Probably," Sasha said. Her voice became contemplative as she considered the challenge. "Can you make sure that the hanger deck is clear? We don't want someone taking a good look at the ship and realising that something isn't quite right."

"Of course," Katy said. Anderson had briefed her on that personally. The Imperial Intelligence ship could pass for a standard ship normally, but if it were carefully examined, there would be no

way to conceal its true nature. She had also been warned that any attempt to examine the ship that closely would trigger a self-destruct. "If it's not a state secret, what exactly are you carrying?"

"Medical packages," Sasha said. She grinned nastily. "Officially, they were smuggled out of the Halo Productions Facility by some greedy bureaucrats and sold to a smuggler who sold them to us. The further away from the Core Worlds, the more money you can get for them and the fewer questions asked. Admiral Wilhelm's staff will be delighted to get their hands on them. They're far superior to the Imperial Navy's standard medical kits."

Katy scowled. "I see," she said. She wasn't surprised to discover that the Thousand Families had kept life-saving equipment for themselves, but it saddened her. How many millions of lives might have been saved if that equipment was generally available to all? How many of her crew from the *Havoc* might have been saved? "What else have you taken over the years?"

"We had to smuggle in some *serious* drugs and pose as drug dealers once," Sasha said, flatly. Katy stared at her. Very few drugs were actually illegal within the Empire — anything that kept the masses from thinking was fine by the Thousand Families — but those that were banned were truly unpleasant. Some of them made slaves out of those unlucky enough to become addicted, while others burned out the pleasure nerves and left the users haunted and bitter shells. "If we could survive that, we could survive anything. Nasty people, those drug dealers."

"Good luck," Katy said, unwilling to consider the matter further. "If there's an urgent development, contact the fleet directly when we arrive at Cottbus. If not, get in touch with me through covert channels." She stood up. "And, like I said, good luck."

Chapter Fifteen

"You know," Daria remarked as she entered the room, "we really should have invested in a smoke generator."

"I beg your pardon?" Tiberius asked. There were nine people coming to the meeting, each one of them important enough to merit their own security — which meant that keeping the meeting secret would be sheer hell — and organising it was incredibly difficult. It was a challenge, one that in the old days he would have relished, but perhaps not when the Empire itself was at stake. "Why would we want to fill the room full of smoke?"

"An old tradition," Daria said, deadpan. "The best conspiracies are always practiced in smoke-filled backrooms."

"I see," Tiberius said. He didn't. Daria was the strangest person he had met. At one point, she could be a strategic genius, with over ninety years of experience to draw on, and at others she could be almost kittenishly playful. He'd studied the classified records for Janice Windsor, as she'd been seventy years ago when she'd taken the throne for the first time, and he found it hard to believe that Imperial Intelligence had missed such a considerable threat. His father and the others of his little conspiracy had certainly ensured that Janice remained unmolested to carry out their plan… even if, in the end, it had failed. "Do you think that this is a conspiracy?"

Daria shrugged. "If treason prospers, it is never called treason," she said dryly. She ran one hand through her long red hair. "I dare say that if we succeed in our plan, no one will dare call us traitors as well."

Tiberius looked up as the Butler escorted the first of his guests into the room. Lord Pompey Cicero, who somehow gave an impression of indolence despite his slim form, took the comfortable chair that Tiberius waved him to and accepted a drink from one of the pleasure slaves. He was the security expert of the Family — as a Family member, the only one who could be trusted not to have an agenda that would harm the Family — and one of the people Tiberius had sent to Harmony, two years ago. Lady Gwendolyn Cicero entered next, having paused long enough to ensure that she entered alone, and took her chair as if it were a throne. She shared a look with Daria — the discovery that she had been working for the Empress for years had chilled Tiberius when he'd finally learned the truth — and leaned back to wait.

"An interesting gathering," a droll voice said, as Admiral Wachter and Captain Penny Quick were shown into the room. Joshua was wearing the same civilian outfit he'd worn when Tiberius had pulled

him away from his Norwegian cabin and sent him to Morrison, to the war. Penny, a blonde-haired woman with an apparent age of twenty-one, was wearing a simple tight-fitting outfit with a beret, which she passed to one of the pleasure slaves as she sat down next to Joshua. If she was intimidated by the surroundings, by being so close to so much wealth and power, she didn't show it.

Or maybe that's Joshua's influence, Tiberius thought. There were many unanswered questions surrounding Joshua's role in the final days of the war, including the rebel ambush of the fleet sent to scorch Gaul, and some investigative reporters had even suggested that Joshua had betrayed the fleet. Ironically, it had made him more of a hero than ever and firmly cemented his position as the Chief of Naval Operations, effectively the Imperial Navy's uniformed head. It might not have been as powerful a position as it once was — Colin controlled the Shadow Fleet and one of his allies from the beginning controlled the new Home Fleet — but it was still influential. *I wonder if they really are lovers*?

"I like to think so, yes," he said, as Joshua frowned at him. He looked more composed than he had been back in Norway, when he had lectured Tiberius on the flaws within the Empire that had made the rebellion inevitable, before accepting command of the Main Strike Fleet. It dawned on Tiberius that Joshua had to be happier now than when he'd been commanding the fleet at Morrison, which suggested that he might not be willing to support them all the way. It might pose a problem. Joshua, as the only real hero from the Imperial side of the war, wasn't someone who could be easily disposed of without too many questions being asked in the wrong places. "Thank you for coming."

Finally, fashionably late, came the remainder of the original council. Lord Bolivar, Lady Hashim, Lord Rothschild and Lady Ngyuen. Their Families had benefited from the new order, which was more than could be said for most of them, and they still wielded enormous influence. Their influence was fading, however, as their industries were steadily taken over by their workers, or by the planets that hosted them, and they were growing desperate. Once the masters of the universe, their whims and fancies altering the destinies of billions, they had become shadows of their former selves.

Tiberius smiled. It was going to be an interesting meeting.

"Thank you all for coming," he said, once the final pleasure slave had left the room. He had once trusted them implicitly, but after one of them had murdered Lord Roosevelt, apparently on the Empress's orders, he no longer trusted them. Several very quiet investigations hadn't managed to find anything out of the ordinary about the pleasure slaves, which Daria herself had given his father permission to

manufacture, but they might have been programmed to do anything. They were the perfect assassins. No one, until Lord Roosevelt had been killed, had suspected them in the slightest. “I apologise for rushing you slightly, but there is a great deal of ground that we must cover and, I fear, very little time. We cannot afford for this meeting to become public knowledge.”

“You mean this conspiracy,” Joshua said, calmly. He nodded across at Daria. “Dare I assume that the presence of the Empress has something to do with the secret of this meeting?”

The Clan Heads gaped. They *hadn’t* known. Tiberius forced his face to remain blank, although he was surprised to learn that Joshua knew — and perhaps had always known — just who the Empress actually was. Gwendolyn had known, but had Joshua also been a member of her conspiracy, even though he’d been a junior officer at the time?

Daria smiled, her face relaxing slightly. “So you do know,” she said, calmly. Suddenly, it was easy to see the aura of command around her, the calm certainty that her orders would be obeyed. She’d probably found running the Freebooters League relaxing after running the Empire. “I wondered if you had realised the truth.”

“Elementary, my dear Tiberius,” Joshua said, speaking more to him that to Daria. “There were rumours of the return of the Empress on Earth. You told me about them yourselves. There weren’t many possible candidates for the role once I started studying them in earnest and she was the most logical candidate. The others could all be accounted for, one way or the other, and I could eliminate them.”

He paused. “And besides, you didn’t change your face that much,” he added dispassionately, speaking directly to Daria. “Once I was thinking along those lines, it was easy to recognise you for who you were.”

“Of course,” Daria agreed. “A genetic test would have revealed the truth, if compared to the Imperial Registry. Someone who looked radically different from the Empress Janice would actually gain more suspicion that someone who looked almost like her, so…”

She smiled, and it was a cold and calculating smile. “And now you know,” she said. “Where do you stand?”

Joshua leaned forward. “I stand for what I’ve always stood for,” he said. “The reformation of the Empire and a unified humanity. I believe that that is hardly a secret to you, Your Majesty.” He took an unhurried look around the room. “And what does this… gathering of the Clans stand for?”

Tiberius spoke into the stunned silence. “Colin Harper, the founder of the rebellion and the guiding presence behind the Empire, is on the verge of making a pair of colossal mistakes,” he said, calmly.

He could still feel the tension in the air. The Clan Heads had reason to distrust anyone who tried for the Imperial Throne… and Joshua and Penny were rogue elements. It would be irony indeed if the conspiracy fell apart because they couldn't stand the thought of being involved with the Empress. "We have to decide upon a response…"

"You mean a way of seizing power for yourselves," Joshua said, his voice cutting through the bullshit like a knife through butter. "Let us not mince words here, Tiberius. There's nobody here, but us traitors."

He leaned back and relaxed. "And it's interesting to note who *isn't* here," he said. "What about Lady Kathy? What about Jason Cordova? What about some of the MPs? What about Ambassador Wilhelm?"

"Kathy Tyler is very firmly on Colin's side," Daria said, her voice almost expressionless. "She has been handed a thankless task, but she is determined to complete it successfully. In effect, whatever loyalties she had to the Thousand Families have been completely lost. Jason Cordova is a different matter, but he is not a person to feel much loyalty towards his Family. The MPs are unimportant, whatever Colin may happen to think, while Ambassador Wilhelm represents a warlord we cannot compromise with. Her presence here would be far too revealing, in any case."

Tiberius, silently relieved that Joshua hadn't blurted out the truth about Cordova's Family, leaned forward. "Colin intends to grant the alien races effective independence from the Empire, and, for those that work for us, full civil rights," he said. "He also intends to push through a devolution of government, with the net result that most worlds will wind up with first-rank status in a few years and hopefully simply the Empire. It will not, however, achieve his aims. It will tear the Empire apart."

"Because the descendents of those you tricked into debts don't want to keep paying interest on debts they didn't incur?"

"Among other matters, yes," Tiberius conceded. There was little wrong with Joshua's mind, but he was starting to wonder if inviting him had been the wisest decision. God only knew what side he was really on, in his head. "At the moment, we have a serious problem with Cottbus Sector. I have spoken to Ambassador Wilhelm myself and while she talks a good game, she isn't going to budge on the important issues. She wants Cottbus to be recognised as a completely independent state as a precondition of any further negotiations and she has been signing deals left, right and centre to ensure that she has thousands of supporters."

"And the Cicero Clan has been attempting to see what it can get out of her," Lord Rothschild said, stroking his lips with a tissue.

"As has the Rothschild Clan," Lady Ngyuen said. Lord Rothschild

nodded without emotion. “We have all attempted to deal with her since the moment she set up shop in her… so-called Embassy. What other choice did we have?”

“I think that we can safely assume that there *is* going to be a war with Cottbus,” Daria said, calmly. “The unity of the Empire demands such a war. Even if Admiral Wilhelm doesn’t take his own shot at the Imperial Throne, we — the Empire — cannot allow an entire sector to break away. Colin knows this as well as we do. His representatives may attempt to sweeten the pot for Admiral Wilhelm, but the bottom line is that the breakaway cannot be tolerated. That means war.”

“A war you have been pressing for,” Joshua pointed out. He smiled thinly at her expression. “I don’t think that we want to do anything to weaken Colin, or the Empire, further when we might find ourselves at the wrong side of a firing squad if Admiral Wilhelm actually wins the war.”

“He has one sector fleet,” Tiberius said, sharply. “Colin can call on much more firepower than he can…”

“So could the Empire when fighting Colin and the rebels,” Joshua said. He sounded as if he were enjoying himself. “You should know, Your Majesty, that having deployable firepower isn’t quite the same thing as having that firepower somewhere where it actually can be used. The Empire had plenty of superdreadnaughts that never saw combat against the rebels.”

He shared a long glance with Penny, and then leaned forward again. “And it seems to be based on an assumption,” he continued. “How do you know that Admiral Wilhelm is alone? There are seven sectors near Cottbus that are probably barely aware that there’s been a change in government. If they decide to get organised as a third power on their own, behind Admiral Wilhelm, we would be facing parity at the very least.”

“They will not have the new weapons,” Daria objected.

“Won’t they?” Joshua asked. “The Empire’s research and development might have been a few years behind the Geeks and Nerds, but they were able to duplicate most of their tricks after they saw them in action. It wasn’t as if they were inventing completely new technologies, merely improvements or refinements on technologies that already existed and were well understood. I see no reason why Admiral Wilhelm can’t have arsenal ships, or multiple-warhead missiles, or even shield-busters. The technology isn’t exactly a quantum leap into the unknown, is it?”

He looked up at Tiberius. “Depending on the exact assumptions, the 2nd fleet could be badly outgunned by the enemy,” he said. “If they have the combined firepower of all eight sectors, massed in one place, the Shadow Fleet would be facing parity, as I said. Our

intelligence is poor. We don't know exactly what they will be facing. I may be a mere tactician, but in Admiral Wilhelm's place, I would punch out 2nd fleet and move directly on Earth. The destruction of the Provisional Government would effectively tip the Empire into his hands."

There was a long pause. "That isn't something we can deal with at the moment," Tiberius said. "The real issue is holding the Empire together…"

"Which will not be possible if Admiral Wilhelm decides that Earth is a suitable target for his class anger and scorches the planet," Joshua said dryly. He smiled thinly. "Very well. Cards on the table. What do you want?"

Daria spoke into the silence. "The same reform program I began fifty years ago," she said, calmly. "We will begin a gradual process of reform that will allow the Empire and it's economy room to breathe, while preventing collapse and disunion from tearing the Empire apart. You, if you chose to join us, would be tasked with reforming the Imperial Navy, creating an environment that would allow competent officers to flourish, regardless of their social origins."

"And you don't feel that Colin will proceed down that path?"

"Colin intends to devolve as much as possible onto the individual worlds," Daria said. "The Empire didn't solve all of the problems from the days of the Federation. It merely kept a firm lid on them. A hands-off policy from Earth would cause nothing, but war and suffering, on a cosmic scale. The Imperial Navy kept the peace for generations. Now, with the Imperial Navy weakened and the new government unsure of its path, strife is already raising its ugly head. How many more billions would die before Colin realises that he's made a mistake and moves to crush it? How much harder will that be because he has indicated that it is permissible?"

She met Joshua's eyes. "How many more are you willing to allow to die because Colin doesn't realise the consequences of his actions?"

Joshua started to speak, but she overrode him. "And autonomous status won't be enough," she continued. "There will be hundreds and thousands of worlds that will seek complete independence from the Empire. Some, such as New Kabul or Eden, will seek to impose intolerable rules on their own people, others will try to engage in trade wars or worse with their neighbours. The Empire enforced fair play across the galaxy, but without it, what will happen to interstellar trade? How many will be improvised, or worse, because the Empire is no longer acting as the umpire?"

"You make a convincing case," Joshua agreed, calmly. "That still leaves you with the problem of actually removing Colin. He's protected by armed and *very* loyal Marines. Home Fleet is no longer

under your command, Your Majesty, but that of one of Colin's closest allies. You don't even have your Household Troops any more, do you?"

"Leave that to us," Daria said, calmly. The confidence in her voice made Joshua blink. It was easy to forget, looking at her, that she had once been a respected and experienced commanding officer. "We have another role for you."

She told him. "Clever," Joshua agreed.

"Our rights will be respected?" Lord Rothschild asked. "There will be no purge of our people?"

"There will be no purge," Daria said. Tiberius smiled. The Family members who might have been a problem, such as the late unlamented Admiral Percival, had already been removed from positions of power. Not all of Colin's reforms had been bad ones. He suspected that Joshua would never allow the Families to slip incompetents into positions of power again. "Will you all commit to joining us?"

She held out a hand. A moment later, Tiberius and the Lords grasped it… and finally Joshua joined them. "If this works, it should be interesting," Joshua said. His voice hardened enough to make Tiberius shiver. "If not, I'll kill the whole lot of you myself."

"If this fails," Daria said, tartly, "there won't be enough of us left to pick up with an electron microscope."

She waited until the last of the visitors had vanished outside, back into the main building. "Get in touch with Jason Cordova," she ordered flatly. There was an utterly uncompromising tone in her voice. "Tell him its time for him to pay his debts to society."

Chapter Sixteen

The *Neddy Seagoon* flickered into existence in the Cottbus System's designated emergence zone.

"Emergence complete," Charlie said, as he altered the starship's course slightly. Cottbus's gravity shadow was only ten minutes away using the drive fields. "I am transmitting a burst IFF signal to System Command now."

Sasha nodded from her position. No one would have mistaken the *Neddy Seagoon* for a warship, although it had quite a few surprises buried away in its hull. She had started life as a pleasure craft owned by some rich kids from the Thousand Families, before they accidentally managed to damage her badly and sell her off to the lowest bidder. Officially, she had been purchased by an independent trio of traders; unofficially, Imperial Intelligence had renovated her to their exacting standards.

"They're responding already," Sandra said, from her console. On the starship, she was strictly business. "They're assigning us to their main spaceport and warning us that leaving the environs of the spaceport without clearance papers would be taken amiss."

"That was quick," Sasha said. Charlie had to agree. System Command centres rarely deigned to notice them until they were much closer to the planet, although Cottbus probably had good reasons for being on alert. If Admiral Garland had been correct, they might be on the verge of war. "Did they send us anything else in the data packet?"

"Nothing beyond the standard guff about not going within weapons range of any of the orbital defences or the main shipyard," Sandra said. "I guess that they're either unconcerned or they're waiting till we're on the ground before springing their trap."

"Bite your tongue," Sasha told her sharply. "Charlie, take us down before they start to wonder why we're wasting our time up here."

Charlie keyed his console and the starship started to head down towards the planet, which was growing larger in the viewport as they approached. The *Neddy Seagoon* had been designed to *look* like a popular image of a starship, rather than the blunt shapes of Imperial Navy warships, and had a genuine cockpit rather than a bridge. It could also, unlike so many other starships, land on a planet, which saved docking at one of the orbital stations and taking a shuttle down to the planet. It would make life easier, in some ways; if they docked at one of the stations, they'd probably run into a customs official wanting a cut. The medical packages would be worth thousands of credits, at the very least, and if they refused to pay the cut, the official could interfere with them without quite breaking the regulations.

“Impressive,” Sasha said, as the shipyard came into view. “It looks as if someone is preparing for war.”

“No shit,” Charlie agreed. He hadn’t seen a Type-I shipyard before and he was rather surprised that it had been built in orbit around an inhabited planet, rather than the gas giant further out like Jupiter, but he had to agree that it was an impressive sight. Hundreds of slips, each one with a starship in various stages of construction, orbited the planet, supervised by hundreds of industrial modules and nodes. Just from what little the passive sensors could pick up, Cottbus was constructing at least nine additional superdreadnaughts and seventeen battlecruisers, while there were no sign of any smaller ships. A handful of freighters, seemingly innocent, floated near the shipyard, each one surrounded by workers.

“Those are arsenal ships, or I’ll eat my hat,” Charlie whispered. There was something about the sight that ordered silence, although he knew — rationally — that there was no way that any of the locals could hear him. “I really don’t like the look of this.”

Sasha snorted. “If it’s surprising you,” she said, “then you’re in the wrong line of work. We knew that they’d probably be building as many warships as they could and now we have confirmation, so…”

Charlie scowled. He’d done enough work on various shipyards to have some experience at judging starship construction times. It took upwards of a year to construct a new superdreadnaught — although rumour had it that the Geeks had successfully halved the construction time — and if Cottbus had started work as soon as the news of the rebellion reached them, they might have an additional two squadrons of superdreadnaughts at their disposal. The passive sensors were far less capable than the active sensors — although bringing up the active sensors would have revealed their true nature to anyone watching — but it was clear enough that Cottbus had at least two squadrons of superdreadnaughts on guard duty. Maybe they weren’t expecting to launch an attack, but preparing to meet one when it came.

He said as much. “Insufficient data,” Sasha rebuked him, gently. “We’ll find out when we land on the planet.”

“True,” Charlie agreed. The blue orb of Cottbus was growing ever larger in the viewport. “Here we go…”

He took direct control of the starship as it plunged into the atmosphere, the drive field glowing red as it absorbed the heat of re-entry, and steered them down towards the spaceport. He wasn’t unduly surprised to discover that the main spaceport was in the centre of a desert — that was fairly standard when starships were involved — but he was surprised by the sheer volume of activity. Hundreds of starships and in-system craft buzzed around, rising up towards space or coming in to land, suggesting that the entire system

was buzzing with industry. It was unusual to see so much activity and it worried him. Normally, System Command tried to keep starships from landing, but now they seemed to be encouraging it.

"We have a designated landing pad," Sandra said, as the Traffic Control system updated them. Cottbus, at least, didn't seem to insist on taking over the starship and landing it by remote control, although he'd seen several disasters caused by badly programmed traffic control systems. "Try not to break the china when you land."

"Bitch," Charlie said, without heat. It was hard to stay angry at Sandra for long. The designated landing pad, he noticed with growing concern, was a sealed hatch, the hanger doors already opening for them and closing over their heads as they landed. They wouldn't be able to leave without paying the hanger fees. The ship touched the ground with nary a bump and he leaned back in his chair as he began the power-down sequence. "You can go pay the docking fees while I get everything shut down."

An hour later, they sealed the ship and headed down the stairs into the main complex. Sandra had picked up a guide to the spaceport and Charlie scanned it while allowing Sasha to lead the way towards the Interstellar Market. It was a fairly typical spaceport, with hundreds of bars, whorehouses and markets to take money from arriving spacers, although they wouldn't be allowed to leave the complex without special permission. Most spacers wouldn't bother *trying* to leave, unless they wanted to see as many new planets as they could; they could get everything they wanted in the spaceport.

The Market itself was throbbing with activity, although mostly they were selling nothing particularly new or interesting. It was more interesting to note what they *weren't* selling. There were no handheld weapons, or even ship-mounted weapons, while there were more than the standard number of alcoholic drinks and barely-legal drugs. A dozen recruiting booths were hard at work, inviting spacers to sign up with the Cottbus Defence Force and help remove the last remains of the Thousand Families from the Empire. Charlie picked up one of the brochures, hoping to discover the party line on events, but it wasn't that informative, only promising that there would be a new dawn under Admiral Wilhelm. It was far from the democratic state that Carola Wilhelm had promised.

"Are you really surprised?" Sasha asked, when he pointed that out. "We knew that it wouldn't be quite what it seemed."

Charlie nodded and followed her through the crowd, keeping his eyes open and peeled. There were hundreds of spacers, but there were also hundreds of Imperial Navy crewmen, although their rank badges had been replaced with something new and different. He identified it, after a moment's thought, as the old seal of Cottbus, back before the

Empire had swallowed it up into its gaping maw, and shivered. If Admiral Wilhelm was resorting to such tricks to gain loyalty, and it seemed that he was, he had to be willing to tear the Empire apart.

Bastard, Charlie thought. It wasn't normal to see Imperial Navy personnel in a civilian and commercial spaceport, including shipyard personnel, but it seemed that Admiral Wilhelm had decided to overturn that particular taboo. It didn't seem logical, but perhaps it was intended as a reward, or maybe even a punishment. He paused to glance inside a bar as they passed it, ignoring the sounds of drinking and loud music, and saw hundreds of other personnel. They looked to be on leave.

But that doesn't make any sense either, he thought, puzzled. If Cottbus was gearing up for war, and it certainly looked that way, why would they have some of their personnel on leave? It wasn't as if they had a surplus of trained manpower, was it? No shipyard in the Empire had enough manpower…

"Ten thousand credits," the dealer said, drawing Charlie's attention back to Sasha. She had found a dealer in rare items and was haggling with him for the medical packages. Judging from some of the other items on his shelves, he was actually purchasing items for pirates, but Charlie found it hard to care. It wouldn't be the first time they had walked into darkness to serve the Empire. "That's the best I can do."

"They're worth about ten times that on the open market," Sasha replied, firmly. "I can accept seventy thousand credits, but no less."

The dealer drew himself up to his full height. "You're trying to beggar me," he said, angrily. "Thirty thousand credits or my children will starve."

Sasha eyed his ample chest. "If that's starvation, I'd hate to see gluttony," she said wryly. "Fifty thousand credits, or my crew will lynch me and sell the packages somewhere else."

"Fifty thousand — done," the dealer agreed. He pulled out a datapad and passed her a copy of his shipping address. "You will send them here and then I will pay you."

"Fine," Sasha agreed. "We'll deal with that now."

She led them away from the dealer's berth. "That was interesting," she said. Charlie suspected that she had privately enjoyed the haggling. "Now, we'll go get the packages and then find the hotel. And then… we'll get to work."

* * *

Senior Supervisor Andy Gillingham allowed himself a smile as he

disembarked from the shuttle at the main spaceport and looked around with interest. It was his first leave, but one he felt he had definitely earned after being promoted to replace the last Senior Supervisor. Thinking of the idiot whose orders he had had to obey, even when they led to outright disaster, made his blood boil, but at least he could enjoy a little gloating. The former supervisor, locked up after a disaster with the superdreadnaught construction program, didn't have anything like that luxury. Gillingham had taken his job and had done it so well that he had been offered promotion already.

He smiled again as he wandered into the spaceport. The old supervisor had been appointed by the Clan's Manger and hadn't known much about shipyards; indeed, it was a miracle he hadn't stepped out of the airlock without a spacesuit before he was removed. He'd known just enough to think he knew it all, which had meant that he had made mistakes, including some that Gillingham had tried to talk him out of making. There were some supervisors who were content to take their pay and stay out of the way, but no, his former one had insisted on having his own way. After Admiral Wilhelm had taken over, thank God, that sort of incompetence had been seriously punished.

And Gillingham himself had benefited. The removal of the Thousand Families meant that he had incredible room to realise his dreams, as long as he stayed loyal and competent. He'd already rammed through an entire series of improvements to the shipyards, ensuring that there were fewer accidents and work went smoother, while proposing other greater changes that would expand the entire production line. If the Admiral agreed to make the investments, and Gillingham saw no reason why he shouldn't, the shipyard would become far more productive. Indeed, it might see Gillingham himself promoted to manager!

He found a small bar and walked inside, looking around for interesting company. Nothing caught his eye until he saw inside one of the small cubicles at the rear of the bar, where a girl was sitting, nursing a drink as if she had been there for a while. She smiled at him and he was hooked, feeling as if he was being pulled over to sit opposite her, smiling back into her face. She had a hauntingly pretty oriental face, with a smile that revealed perfect teeth, and long dark hair that seemed to shine like the inky darkness of space. He could see the tops of her breasts in her outfit, but her hair fell down, covering them.

"Ah… hello," he said, cursing himself for a fool. He'd wanted to be the charmer, the seducer, but somehow it hadn't come out quite right and he sounded like an idiot. It always happened when he tried to talk to pretty girls. He either managed to convince them that he

was a drooling idiot, or that he was only interested in their bodies, or he got as far as telling them where he worked and they lost interest, if they'd ever had interest. A whole series of chat-up lines rose to the forefront of his mind and he, somehow, refrained from actually saying them. "Hello?"

She smiled at him as if she understood him perfectly. "Hello to you too," she said. It sounded like an invitation to bed and he felt his body quiver. "Are you new here too?"

"No, I work at the shipyards," Gillingham said, before he could stop himself. She was going to be bored, he just knew, as he started to talk, but somehow she kept listening to him. "And yourself?"

"I just got in on a freighter and I have to wait here for another one," she said. She held out a hand. "My name is Sandra, by the way."

Gillingham took her hand and, somehow, worked up the nerve to kiss it. It felt warm and wonderfully soft under his lips. "Charmed," he said. "My name is Andy."

She laughed warmly. "Pleased to meet you, Andy," she said. "Are you going to keep me company for a while?"

It felt as if they chatted for hours. He spoke about everything and, for once, he didn't feel like a gibbering idiot. Perhaps it was the soft brown eyes that rested on his, or perhaps it was the fact she asked intelligent questions, but somehow he couldn't hold anything back. He could just feel the sexual tension rising and falling, but somehow he was enjoying her company too much to make a move, even though he wanted her desperately. His eyes kept dropping to the rise and fall of her breasts, pure white against the darkness of her hair, and yet, somehow she didn't leave him alone.

"I think they're going to want us to leave soon," she said, finally. Gillingham glanced at his timepiece. Had it really been four *hours* since he'd met Sandra? "Would you like to come with me for a nightcap?"

Gillingham couldn't have refused her even if he'd been due back on the shipyard. She took his hand and led him towards the stairs, up towards a bedroom. It occurred to him to wonder what she might have been doing with a bedroom where she met him, but somehow the moment the thought occurred to him she brought him to her and kissed him. For a moment, he was too surprised to react… and then he kissed her back, hard.

The universe seemed to dissolve in a wave of lust. His hands fell down towards her breasts, stroking them and tearing at her shirt, ripping it away from her chest and revealing her perfect figure. One hand reached down to her trousers and pushed them down, while the other pulled her closer to him. Her hands were undoing his clothes with a calm precision, even as she pulled him towards the bed and

pushed him down on it. She reached inside his pants and touched his penis… and the universe went away on a tidal wave of pleasure.

* * *

"My, talk about a wild animal," Charlie said, as he entered the room. Sandra's shirt was ripped and torn, exposing her breasts for all to see. She was pulling up her trousers, but even they were damaged by the sheer passion that the drugs had unleashed. "I guess he really did want you after all."

Sandra glared at him, completely unbothered by her near-nakedness. "I expected the drug to kick in well before I got too exposed," she said, looking down at the unconscious form of Andy Gillingham. The drug she'd painted on her lips before she waited to see who would walk into her trap should have borne him away on a tidal wave of pleasure. When he awoke properly, he would remember nothing more than a brief pleasant encounter with a girl. "I didn't mind sucking and fucking him for the cause, of course, but…"

"Of course," Sasha agreed. She winked at Charlie as Sandra discarded the remainder of her outfit and pulled on a black dressing gown. She had seduced others for Imperial Intelligence before during her long career. Gillingham hadn't had the slightest idea of what was going to hit him. "Now, before this gets any more exciting, let's find out what your lover knows, shall we?"

Chapter Seventeen

"How does it feel to be back here?"

Jason Cordova scowled at him. Even wearing a more subdued outfit, rather than his traditionally outrageous mixture of bright colours and flamboyant design, he looked intimidating. He might have hoped, Tiberius suspected, that the absence of his normal outfit would put any watchers off the scent, but there was no mistaking him for a harmless man. Something, long ago, had burned most of the human weaknesses out of Jason Cordova and it showed.

"I feel strange," he said, flatly. There was little tone in his voice. Someone who had survived and prospered among the inhabitants of the Rim would be skilled at controlling themselves, refusing to act violently unless there was no other choice. Tiberius had never been to the Rim, not even on his Grand Tour of the Empire, but he'd heard stories. Life was cheap along the Rim for those who chose to play the great game of intrigue. "I never expected to be back here again."

"We always kept a candle in the window for you," Tiberius said, carefully. Cordova wasn't armed, at least on the surface, but he was a very dangerous man. In theory, the guards outside the room should be able to break in and stop him before he killed Tiberius, if he decided to go out in a blaze of violence and glory, but Tiberius wouldn't have cared to bet his life on it. The fact he *was* betting his life on it wasn't one he wanted to face. "You were always honoured as a member of the Family."

Cordova's gaze wandered to the Family Wall, a giant family tree that traced the Cicero Family backwards to the foundation of the Empire and beyond, even to the pre-spaceflight days when Earth had been a heavily populated world on the brink of disaster. It was complete and comprehensive, although Tiberius's father had once told him that it was also unreliable for pre-spaceflight members, but it lacked one name. Jason Cordova wasn't just scored out, disowned by his family, but removed completely. He had been written out of the Family's history.

"I appear to be missing," he said, dryly. "There are my two sisters, married off now to bring two other Families into the Clan. There is my brother, dead in a duelling accident the year after I… departed. There is my mother, God rest her soul, and my father, who expired pleasantly, if not peacefully, in someone else's bed. Where is Jason *Cicero*, I ask you?"

"We did not wish to formally disown you," Tiberius said. It sounded weak and he knew it, but perhaps Cordova would accept it as the truth, or at least the accepted version of events. "Given what was

at stake…"

"I do the right thing for once in my parasitical existence and I get forced out of the Family, forced to flee for the Rim with a pack of battlecruisers snapping at my heels," Cordova snapped. "Where was the Family's concern then?"

"The Family's very existence was at stake," Tiberius reminded him. He forced as much conviction into his voice as he could. "We had little choice, but to wipe you from official history, just to prevent the other Families from learning the truth."

"I would be very surprised if some of them didn't know the truth," Cordova sneered, sarcastically. "It might have been kept from the poor common folk, who would have been the first to condemn me if the truth came out, but I doubt it was a secret from the other Families. The more senior ones, at least, could have found out the truth before you managed to cover it up."

Tiberius lifted an eyebrow. "And how do you account for the fact that none of them ever sought to use it against us?" He asked. "It's political antimatter. If they used it as a weapon, they would have the entire Family…"

He paused, looking for words. Cordova suggested them. "Bent over a table, chained down and with our legs spread?"

"Effectively," Tiberius agreed. Cordova was trying to rattle him slightly. He was determined that it wouldn't work, even if the conversation became even cruder. "They never attempted to use it as a weapon against us…"

"Because it was always a two-sided sword," Cordova said. "You stand here in the High City, secure — or you were secure — in your power and position, and you don't grasp what it might mean to the commoners. They don't draw any distinction between Cicero and Roosevelt, or Rothschild and Windsor; they just care about the Thousand Families, the aristocrats who have been systematically sucking the life out of the Empire. They wouldn't care about fine details like the fact it was a Cicero who made the decision; they would blame the entire system!"

He leaned forward, close enough for Tiberius to smell his breath. "That's why they never tried it on your father, or anyone else from your Family," he snapped. "It would rebound on them as well."

"You may be right," Tiberius conceded. *He'd* never known the truth until after his father died and he'd read the secret files. He had assumed that the cover-up had worked and that no one else knew the truth. Cordova was right, however; the other Families might well know the truth already, but regard it as a weapon of mass destruction, politically speaking. "Still, I doubt that it will benefit you if the truth came out now."

“Colin would understand,” Cordova said. “You managed to save Cicero from the doom that came to Roosevelt and a dozen other Families. Are you sure you want to risk throwing that all away just to get me sucking your dick?”

Tiberius considered it. “You *have* seen the news recently?” He asked. “Sure, *Colin* might understand, but how many others will share his… compassion? Is it not far more likely that they will seek to lynch you in the streets?”

He turned to peer out of the windows, down towards the garden below. The news of Colin’s latest proposals had hit the Empire hard, with acrimonious exchanges in Parliament and a great deal of covert manoeuvring behind the scenes. Daria had been right, he realised; Colin had, however accidentally, destabilised part of the Empire. The repercussions might be a long time coming, but they would come. The real question was how far Colin was prepared to go to get his way.

His gaze slipped upwards towards the blue sky. Floating up there, lost in the glare of the sun, were thirty-five orbital battle stations, each one controlled by Colin’s loyalists… and perfectly capable of bombarding the surface of Earth. Beyond them, if more were needed, were three squadrons of superdreadnaughts and their escorts, protecting Earth from external and internal threats. Colin could have his way, if he decided to threaten them with the wrath of the Shadow Fleet, but that would destroy the system he was trying to build. He would become Emperor in all, but name… and Daria had already discovered the limits of that position.

And that’s why she wants the war with Admiral Wilhelm, he thought coldly. *It won’t just expend Colin’s loyalists, but it will serve as an excuse for all kinds of war-related changes, including some that will strengthen the Empire. A single-minded ruler would be far more effective than a committee…*

“They might,” Cordova said. He wandered over to the bookshelves and took a book from them at random. “My life would be forfeit in that case… and the Cicero Clan would be badly damaged by the information. I could return to the *Random Numbers* and vanish off to the Rim, but how could you do that, unless you abandoned the factories and industries that make you powerful? Are you sure that you want to play this card?”

Tiberius took a breath. “And where would you hide?”

“I beg your pardon?” Cordova asked. “I spent years on the Rim. I know hundreds of places where I could hide a light cruiser and her crew…”

“And how long would that last if the truth got out?” Tiberius asked. “I would see to it that the truth got everywhere. Your former friends and allies would desert you, even if they didn’t shoot you on

sight, just from general principles. Your admirers would become your strongest detractors. Those who praised you for standing up for the right would damn you louder than anyone else."

"Never underestimate the power of sheer embarrassment," Cordova agreed, coldly. "They defended me, only to discover that they were defending… I don't think I did the wrong thing."

"Politics," Tiberius said. "You might have done the perfectly correct thing under any dispassionate moral laws, but popular opinion will hold that what you did was wrong, wrong, so wrong that you should be put in front of a wall and shot, or handed over to Imperial Intelligence as a test subject. Worse, your crew clearly knew the truth — they must have done — and *they* will be regarded as your accomplices. Where will *they* go after the truth is revealed and you become public enemy number one?"

Cordova's eyes flashed. "You do *not* threaten my crew," he snapped. "They're the ones who came with me when every man's hand was against me. I may be related to you and that blonde bimbo you sent as an Ambassador, but they're my *real* family!"

"But you miss this Family," Tiberius said. He leaned forward, despite himself. "You chose to enter a relationship with someone who shared the same background as yourselves, as well as a desire to alter the Empire. Since you came back here, after the Battle of Earth, you have stayed here, at the High City. You didn't take Colin's offer of a squadron and the Volunteer Fleet has been largely disbanded. Why would you stay here, were it not for the fact that you missed it?"

He watched Cordova carefully. No one from the outside would understand it, but the Thousand Families were *family*. A person who was born into that complex network of intertangling families and relationships would never need to fear. They might intrigue against each other, they might positively loathe each other from time to time, but they were always there. Their mere presence was comforting for those exposed to the harsh realities of the universe, even though the universe had changed sharply. So many of the Thousand Families might like to try to pretend that nothing had changed, holding parties as if they still didn't have a care in the galaxy, and it was succeeding. The Families were warmth and safety to the younger aristocrats…

And he was sure that he had hit on the truth. No one doubted Cordova's competence as a starship commander. He might not have been suitable to command a squadron — Joshua had hinted at that much, and Tiberius didn't know anyone else with more right to an opinion on the subject — but he could have taken the *Random Numbers* to join the fleet gathering near Cottbus, or anywhere else. Instead, he had chosen to stay and be effectively useless… why? The only reason that made sense to Tiberius was that he wanted to be back

with the Families.

"They also need someone to keep an eye on you and watch your activities," Cordova said, finally. It wasn't particularly convincing. "Colin is a clever person and a diabolical strategist, but he doesn't have the mindset to cope with you and battles fought on… less open ground. I decided to remain here so that I could watch you and deal with any problems you might cause."

He leaned forward himself. "And I still fail to see why I should consider transferring my loyalties to you," he said. "Yes, you have blackmail information, but are you willing to use it if I refuse?"

Tiberius met his eyes. "Yes," he said, flatly. Cordova lifted a single eyebrow, never breaking eye contact. It was hard for Tiberius to hold contact, but somehow he managed. "You would leave me with no other choice."

"I could kill you right now," Cordova said, dispassionately. He still hadn't broken eye contact. Tiberius believed him implicitly. "You may have some highly illegal enhancements in your body, but nothing that would stop me from breaking your neck before your guards could rush in and overpower me."

The words almost made Tiberius shiver. He held onto himself firmly. "And the truth would still get out," he said, calmly. "I didn't agree to hold this meeting without creating a fallback position for myself. No one with any sense would expose themselves so much when they could be… removed at any moment."

"Indeed?" Cordova asked. "And you're willing to hazard your life on it?"

"There is a second point," Tiberius said. He forced his voice to harden. He had thought that it would be easy, but there was something about Cordova's presence and attitude that made him want to grovel. "If something happens to me, and if by some miracle you avoid the guards and escape, Kathy Tyler will be killed."

Cordova stared at him. "And you think that that would bother me?" He demanded, but his eyes told the truth. He might not have loved her — Tiberius found the idea of Cordova having anything to do with love a little amusing — but he certainly cared for her. She was also very important to the Provisional Government. Colin wouldn't be able to find someone else with her credentials quickly. Indeed, the best person at his disposal would have been Tiberius himself…

"Yes," Tiberius said, flatly.

There was a long pause. "Fine," Cordova said, finally. "You appear to have me over a barrel. Should I drop my pants now?"

"No, thank you," Tiberius said, angrily. Even if he swung that way, and he didn't, he doubted that Alicia would have approved. It was considered bad form to cheat on your fiancée, even in the

Thousand Families, until the final papers were signed and agreements had been made. “I want you to do something for us.”

“Us?” Cordova asked. “Could it be that there are others involved in this scheme?”

Tiberius said nothing. Cordova didn’t know, and couldn’t be allowed to know, that Daria was the Empress. He wasn’t someone who could be completely trusted and even if he were, he didn’t need to know. The information would probably kill him, when he finally found out. They might not have been friends, but they’d worked together to develop the Freebooter’s League into a genuine political force.

And then Colin comes along and knocks all their plans into scrap, Tiberius thought, amused. Daria’s original plan would have eventually dropped the entire Empire into her lap like ripe fruit, but instead Colin had appeared out of nowhere and launched the rebellion against the Thousand Families, at least twenty years too soon. Tiberius wasn’t going to complain about that, however; the original plan might not have included either him or the Cicero Family. Who would have predicted that a lowly Commander would have had the nerve to take an entire observation squadron and *then* an entire superdreadnaught squadron?

Joshua did, he thought, and scowled. Joshua had warned him, way back once the news of the rebellion had reached Earth, that the Thousand Families had made thousands of competent and determined enemies, who knew that there would be no chance of promotion or even security under their rule. The discussion had been an eye-opener — and he knew that Joshua intended to change things in the Imperial Navy, bureaucrats be damned — and it said more about Colin than Daria. Colin wanted to change things because he believed in right and wrong; Daria wanted to change things to preserve the Empire.

“Yes,” he said finally, and refused to give any more details. “I shall place my cards on the table. We want you to prepare to… remove Colin from power.”

Cordova smiled. “You do realise that that is high treason?”

“Why doth treason never prosper?” Tiberius asked, rhetorically. Joshua had taught him the quote years ago. “Because if it prospers, Jason, none dare call it treason.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You can probably guess at the consequences,” Tiberius said. He smiled and sat back into his armchair. “I am willing, however, to sweeten the pot. If you do as we order — and strike when we tell you to strike — I will bring you back into the Family fold. You can become Jason Cicero once again, with all the rights and duties that that

implies, and Kathy can marry you, entering the Family. Your children would be brought up within the Family and they will want for nothing."

He leaned forward. "I will even designate them as being within the second tier, if you wish," he added. "They will be in line for the Clan Headship."

Cordova's face twisted. Tiberius could almost read his thoughts. A person in the second tier wouldn't be *that* close to the headship, but Tiberius himself had no children, not yet. If he never produced a child, he would leave the second tier — which included Gwendolyn and Pompey — to fight it out over the succession. Any child of Cordova and Kathy Tyler would have an excellent chance to become Clan Head. It should have been irresistible.

"I'll think about it," Cordova said, finally.

"This isn't the time to play games," Tiberius warned, sharply. ". On this, you are either with us, or against us. There is no middle ground. If you are not ready to move when we give the signal, the truth will come out and you will become the most hated man in the galaxy."

Cordova smiled. He seemed genuinely amused. "When there's so much competition for the title?" He asked. There was a mocking note in his voice. "You *must* have a high opinion of my capabilities."

He bowed once and left the room. Tiberius knew what he would do. He'd been careful to give Cordova no choice. One way or the other, he would do as Tiberius bid… or his new life would come crashing down around him.

Chapter Eighteen

Andy Gillingham lay on the bed, a strange half-smile on his face.

Charlie watched dispassionately as Sandra lay next to him, wearing only a pair of thin panties, and murmured questions in his ear. The drug she'd hit him with, apart from merely bringing a sex-starved man face-to-face with her perfect body, had been artfully designed. Gillingham would remember nothing of the conversation, or even of the interrogation, remembering only a romantic meeting with a fellow traveller. His mind would add details itself, from how much she enjoyed his attentions to how many times they'd done it in the bed, and he wouldn't be inclined to question them. It would have drawn his conquest into question.

The drug itself was fast-acting and very hard to detect. It had sent him into a light trance, one that he would take hours to come out of, even without being prodded. It would leave his system fairly quickly and would be completely gone within a few hours, although he would remain entranced for much longer. Imperial Intelligence had taught Sandra how to use her body and sexuality to best advantage and Charlie knew just how good she was. Gillingham would never know what had hit him.

He was also incapable of hearing anyone, but Sandra. A squad of armed Marines could have burst into the room, shouting orders and firing their weapons right next to his ears, and he wouldn't have heard a thing. Charlie could chat with Sasha all he wanted and Gillingham wouldn't know; he wouldn't even be aware of their presence. Sandra was his entire universe now, as long as he remained in trance, and he would have a perfect explanation for missing time. In the past, taking someone out of the loop for more than a few hours would have raised eyebrows, but now anyone suspicious would discover that Gillingham had merely found a partner for the night.

"A stroke of luck, perhaps," Sasha said, beckoning Charlie away from the bed to the other side of the room. Charlie came without reluctance. Somehow, knowing what was going on robbed the scene of all of its emotional value. Gillingham would be devastated if he knew how little Sandra cared for his opinion, or even his body. She'd once lured a pair of Imperial Navy officers with dubious loyalties into her bed, engaged in a long and happy session of pillow talk with them, and then calmly reported them to Imperial Intelligence as possible subversives. The two men had never connected her with their arrest, quick trial and sentence to a prison world. "What do you think?"

Charlie frowned. Gillingham would never know that Sandra had

picked him out of a crowd and called him effortlessly to her — *come hither*, his mind whispered — but it was quite possible that they'd had too much luck. If someone suspected their presence, why not take the opportunity to slip them a ringer? Imperial Intelligence didn't have a monopoly on willingness to use dubious means when necessary and whatever counter-intelligence Admiral Wilhelm possessed would be looking out for spies. It didn't seem likely, however. If he were normal, Gillingham couldn't have hidden anything from Sandra and the kind of brain-surgery required to alter his responses to the point where he could hide something — anything — would have been obvious right from the start.

But it was still a worrying coincidence.

"I think we've gotten lucky," he said, finally, after outlining all of his reservations. The same problems would have occurred to Sasha. She was, in many ways, far more experienced than he was at such matters. "The odds against it, however…"

"It gets worse," Sasha said. She tapped the side of her head meaningfully. "I checked Andy Gillingham against the database of citizens — Cottbus citizens, that is — and he doesn't show up. That shouldn't happen, not for someone who has clearly worked in a shipyard — he talks the talk too good for that to be a lie — and its worrying."

Charlie felt his eyes go wide. The Empire tried to register *everyone*, no exceptions, who lived within the Empire. It rarely worked out perfectly in practice — there were uncounted *trillions* of humans within the Empire — but everyone who worked directly for a shipyard, a Type-I shipyard at that, should have been registered. Sasha hadn't been able to carry all the names and details around in her head, but they'd pulled a copy from the Imperial Intelligence base on Hawthorn and Gillingham's name should have been there. If it wasn't…

"I suspect he's genuine all right, but that he's not from here," Sasha said. "If he was brought in from outside the sector, he won't be on our lists." She raised her voice. "Sandra, ask him where he comes from."

There was a brief moment when Sandra whispered sweet nothings in his ear and listened, carefully, to his murmured responses. "Tao's World," she said, finally. Charlie swore. He couldn't remember, offhand, who Tao had been and if he'd named the world personally, but he knew where it was. Sector 77, right on the other side of Cottbus from Earth… and now almost certainly an ally of Admiral Wilhelm. The calculations about relative fleet strengths had just been proven invalid. He might have upwards of twice as many ships as had been predicted… and *that* meant that Cottbus should have been far

more heavily defended.

He listened as Sandra, following his thoughts, asked more probing questions. The story that emerged was growing worrying. Gillingham had been summoned to Cottbus to assist with the redevelopment of the shipyard… from his previous position at Tao's World. That made a depressing kind of sense. The shipyards and starships on the outskirts of the Empire tended to be in better shape than the ships further in towards the Core Worlds. If the stories about Morrison were true, the starships there hadn't been able to operate until their new commanding officer had executed the previous commanding officer and started a massive refitting program. Admiral Wilhelm hadn't missed a trick.

And as for the numbers of starships…

"Hellfire," Sasha muttered. "Sandra, put him into a deeper trance. We need to talk."

They moved to a secondary room, even though there was little point. Gillingham wouldn't have heard or remembered anything, at least in theory, once Sandra had put him into a deeper trance, but none of them had lasted long by taking foolish chances. Sandra didn't bother to dress, but she picked up a glass of water and drank it noisily, just to cool herself down. Seducing the innocent, Charlie decided, was obviously thirsty work.

"The logic is inescapable," Sasha said, once the door was closed and Charlie had run a sweep for bugs. They hadn't found one since they'd moved into the small hotel complex, but some of the places they'd stayed had been virtual auditoriums. It was quite common for landlords to watch their patrons carefully, just in case of recording blackmail material, or just out of simple voyeuristic interest. "Admiral Wilhelm has the support, according to Andy there, of three other sectors. That is not good."

As understatement, Charlie thought, it took the limit. "Yes," he said, flatly. He knew more about starships and space warfare techniques, at least in theory, than the others, but he was far from an expert. "If he has the combined sector fleets, he out-masses Admiral Garland by at least three-to-one. The result will not be pretty."

"The 2nd fleet includes a lot of the new technology," Sandra pointed out. The exact details might have been classified, but they knew the basics, everyone did. Admiral Wilhelm would certainly have sensor records from the Battle of Earth. "Won't that even the odds?"

Charlie shook his head. "Against three times her strength with absolutely no warning of what she's facing?"

"True," Sasha said. She glanced down at her timepiece. "That leaves us with an interesting problem. Admiral Garland will have *already* departed her base and we have no idea where she intends to

use as her final waypoint. If we intend to warn her, we must do so here, which will almost certainly reveal our own presence."

"I hate to be cold-blooded about this," Sandra said, "but there are three of us and over thirty thousand men and women on her ships. Our lives are nothing compared to that — or, for that matter, starships that cannot be replaced quickly."

Charlie rolled his eyes. A woman who could casually seduce someone, drug him for interrogation and then walk around almost naked was always cold-blooded. He wouldn't have slept with Sandra, despite her beauty and extensive array of sexual skills, even if he were offered all the wealth in the Empire. She used her beauty as she used everything else — as a weapon.

"I know," Sasha said. "If we warn the Admiral directly, we will reveal our presence, so we don't want to do that. Remaining here may offer us a chance to take a shot at Admiral Wilhelm directly."

Sandra scowled. "Assassination is not within our orders," she said, firmly, crossing her arms under her breasts. "If we go beyond the scope…"

"What choice do we have?" Sasha asked, reasonably. "If Admiral Wilhelm is far more powerful than he seems, then he will tear hell out of the Empire, even if he loses in the end. We should take up a position within his power structure and take the first shot at him we get. This is our duty."

"I am not disputing that," Charlie said, holding up a hand. "However, that still leaves us with the problem of warning the fleet. That was covered directly in our orders."

He ran through the possibilities. A direct radio transmission would betray their presence. A laser communications beam was undetectable, but using it would require knowing where the fleet was going to emerge and remaining in orbit for a long period, neither of which they had. The *Neddy Seagoon* might be able to leave the system, but she wouldn't be allowed to float in orbit, not when she could land. Even trying to remain in orbit would set off all kinds of signals at System Command.

Sasha stroked her chin. "Sandra, could you slip a post-hypnotic suggestion into your lover?"

Sandra frowned. "Maybe," she said, reluctantly. "You want him to organise an emergency signal to the fleet?" Sasha nodded. "I can try, but I don't know if it will take."

Charlie nodded. The public view of Imperial Intelligence was that it could condition someone to do anything, from going into sexual slavery to acting as an unwitting spy among their former friends and allies. It was even true, to some degree, but it required a long period of conditioning and access to drugs and technology that they didn't

possess… and, under the right sort of analysis, it was instantly noticeable. A post-hypnotic command, given to a man under the influence of various drugs, might work… or it might simply be dismissed as another mad influence.

"Unless someone comes up with an alternative, we have no choice," Sasha said. Charlie scowled. The best alternate plan he could think of was to insert a command into the orbital communications network, but they didn't have a webhead with them and anything lesser would probably be noticed. "You can implant the command and then bring him out of his trance slowly. The rest of us will start looking for a way into Admiral Wilhelm's stronghold."

* * *

Andy Gillingham struggled back to awareness, surfacing from a bed of pleasure and joy reluctantly, not wanting to wake up. He felt wonderfully refreshed and relaxed, as if he had been sleeping for a week, and reached out with a hand. It touched what was indisputably a female breast and his eyes snapped open. There was a girl in bed with him!

Memories returned; they'd met back at the bar, they'd gone up to her room… and they'd slept together. He was sure of it. Somehow, he'd picked up a wonderful girl and fucked her senseless! Her eyes opened and met his… and he felt himself falling into her dark ovals. She smiled at him, kissed his lips again, and climbed on top of him, pushing down and impaling herself on his penis. As she started to ride him, all of Gillingham's questions faded away, replaced only with the certainty of her presence. He didn't want to — he couldn't — question here.

Afterwards, they lay in bed, nibbling from a tray of food that room service had forwarded to them. The poor assistant had seen everything when Sandra opened the door, but she'd merely taken the food from him, placed a small kiss on his cheek while his eyes still hadn't reached her face, and closed the door firmly behind him.

"What's the time?" He asked, finally. He hadn't even wanted to look at his watch and he had a nasty suspicion that he'd overstayed his welcome. "How long have we been…?"

"Oh, enough to make me really sore and happy, lover," Sandra said, calmly. She passed him his watch and smiled. "You really have the stamina of a horse."

Somehow, that didn't seem strange to him. He checked his watch and swore. He wasn't overdue at the shipyard, but he would have to run. He leapt out of bed and ran into the shower. A moment later,

Sandra joined him.

"Hey," he protested, as she started to wash his hair. No one had washed his hair since he'd been a child. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning you," Sandra said, practically. Her bare breasts pushed against his back as one hand reached down to stroke his penis. "Will I see you again later?"

They exchanged communications codes before parting. He couldn't remember being as happy in his life. Somehow, she made him feel complete…

And he missed the look of contempt she shot his back completely.

* * *

The destroyer flickered into existence just outside the gravity shadow, already racing towards the planet fast enough to be dangerous. Targeting sensors locked onto the ship at once, sending orders through the network to prepare to engage when — if — it came within range, while communication beams demanded identification and explanations. The crew of the destroyer sent back a single signal, addressed to Admiral Wilhelm personally, and the targeting sensors snapped off. Having delivered its message, the destroyer slowed and settled down into a proper orbit. It had been a long flight.

Admiral Wilhelm was having breakfast when the message arrived on his terminal. He'd been expecting it long enough to abandon a half-eaten plate of bacon and eggs on the table and open the message instead, skimming it quickly. Admiral Garland — her name had been picked up from intercepted transmissions in the system — was finally on her way. The picketing destroyer had even managed to sneak close enough to get a fairly comprehensive list of ship types and names, although most of them were of unfamiliar design.

The Geeks at work, he thought, as he studied the images. They would have been incomprehensible to a layman — and he had to admit that he couldn't have pulled as much from them as a fully-trained analysis team — but there was a surprising amount of detail. His analysts had estimated that the *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts had half again the firepower of a *General*-class superdreadnaught, but if they had managed to improve and perfect the fire control system, they might have twice as much firepower. There was no way to know, short of actually engaging them, but the Nerds had warned that the Geeks had made big steps forward in ECM and fire control systems.

He scowled. The real limit on warship size wasn't anything to do with the flicker drive. With enough power, someone could push a

planet through flicker-space, although in practice the gravity shadow would have made that impossible. The limit was how many missiles a starship could *fire* and *control*. An arsenal ship merely fired off a single mass of missiles, their dumb warhead mentalities focused on hitting one target, while using a handful of coordinating missiles to improve their targeting. The system was simple enough and easy to duplicate. The Geeks, however, had actually improved the targeting system for their superdreadnaughts… and that made them more deadly than ever. Even worse, if they had expanded the concept to the arsenal ships as well, they would have far more effective firepower than his entire fleet. The presence of the other Admirals, however, would tip the scales.

The data finished scrolling up the terminal and asked if he wanted to review it again. He shook his head and cancelled that request, choosing instead to forward the data to the other Admirals and the analysis section. It was a pity that they hadn't been able to get any sensor records of the rebel fleet drilling — that would have allowed him to get a feel for how his opponent thought and acted — but they had enough. Judging from the records at the end, they could expect Admiral Garland within a day, perhaps longer. An entire fleet took longer to manhandle to a particular location than a single starship.

He keyed his communicator and smiled as the face of his tactical officer appeared on the display. "I'm forwarding you the data from the destroyer," he said. "Use the laser links and warn Task Force 2 and Task Force 3 to remain firmly under cloak; I don't want to see even a hint of their presence on my displays. Once that's completed, I want you to study the records carefully and report to me in two hours to compare conclusions."

The thrill of finally coming to blows with his opponent warmed him. "And send a classified signal to all ships," he concluded. "I want them to prepare for action at a moment's notice. Tell them not to worry about the expense, or the wear and tear on the equipment, not when the rebel fleet is finally on its way."

He smiled. "We wouldn't want to be inhospitable," he said. He allowed, just briefly, his teeth to show. "We must prepare a proper welcome."

Chapter Nineteen

Admiral Katy Garland tensed as the superdreadnaught reverted to normal space, gripping the handles of her command chair as the standard nausea rolled through her body before finally subsiding. The transit back to normal space had been fairly mild, by the standards of some of the transits back during the war, but it still make her body threaten to be sick. There were some who claimed that the feeling was purely psychometric, all in the mind, but in Katy's experience, few of them were dedicated spacers. Spacers knew that the feeling was very real… and, under the wrong circumstances, that it could kill. They knew not to take it lightly.

"Emergence complete," the helmsman said, from his position. Spacers underwent special training to control the effects of transition shock, but it was still an effort to speak coherently. If anyone ever managed to invent a way of tracking starships in flicker-space and setting up an ambush, one of the holy grails of the Empire, it would change warfare overnight. "The fleet has arrived and units are checking in now."

"Launch probes," Katy ordered, as the display started to fill up with the icons representing her fleet. It was still too soon to see anything orbiting Cottbus, but there was nothing hostile in their emergence zone, although Admiral Wilhelm would know about them almost at once. She hadn't bothered with any attempt at stealth, even though it would have been probably futile with so many starships; she *wanted* him to know that she was there. "Tactical, check in with the fleet; I want them forming up into Formation Alpha, just like we practiced."

That had been the result of a barely-civil 'discussion' between her and René Goscinny. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, to use his title from Gaul, had argued that the fleet should emerge within the designated emergence zone and approach Cottbus in a decidedly non-hostile manner. Katy, who doubted that anyone could view the approach of twenty-seven superdreadnaughts — to say nothing of their escorts — as anything, *but* hostile, had vetoed that idea. They might not have come to start a fight, but she didn't intend to show any signs of weakness, or even respect. If Admiral Wilhelm had been capable of luring eight cruisers within point blank range and then opening fire… well, she didn't intend to give him a clear shot at *her* hulls.

She glanced down at one of her blank communications screens and smiled to herself. Goscinny had wanted to travel in a space yacht, on the grounds that it would be far less threatening and much more

comfortable than a superdreadnaught, but she'd nixed that idea as well. A civilian ship couldn't hope to stand up to the firepower orbiting Cottbus and she didn't want to lose Goscinny, who could be good company when he put his mind to it, to treachery from the planet below. He was currently sitting in his stateroom — which had more luxury than *she'd* ever had as a mere Commander — waiting for his chance to shine.

"The fleet's responded, Admiral," the tactical officer said. "There are no major problems. They're forming up into Formation Alpha now."

Katy nodded without taking her eyes off the display. Manoeuvring any kind of large fleet was a cumbersome process, even with the most capable and experienced crews in the galaxy, and she had to admit that she didn't have experienced crewers. They'd improved considerably during their brief period of exercises and heavy drilling, but she would have preferred more time. Of course, as the Imperial Navy saying went, time was a commodity that was purchased in lives. There simply hadn't been the time to drill her crews to perfection.

Formation Alpha took shape in front of her and she smiled. The formation wasn't exactly threatening, but it was capable of repelling attack from any direction — although the probes had found no trace of cloaked ships anywhere in the vicinity — and easily being altered into a very hostile formation indeed. She was sending a message, she knew, and she was confident that Admiral Wilhelm would pick up on it. He could stand down and discuss the future, or he could fight… and she was ready for both. Her fleet would not be caught with its shields down or drives depowered, unable to fight or run.

"Formation accomplished," the tactical officer said.

"Good," Katy ordered. "Helm, take us towards the planet, quarter speed. Nice and slow. We want them to know we're coming."

She spared a glance at her communications panel, only to see nothing. Admiral Wilhelm probably wasn't interested in talking, at least not yet. It was possible that his subordinates were running around like headless chickens, rather than daring to wake him up from a good night's sleep, but she cautioned herself not to fall into the trap of assuming that he was out of play. She'd once had a commanding officer who believed firmly in sleeping as often as possible and had taken grave offence at anyone who woke him, but surely Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't be like that, would he?

The display continued to fill up as passive sensors pulled in data from across the system. Even accounting for the speed of light delays — and the limited sensors mounted on the probes — it was an impressive display, almost the equal of Earth's solar system or one of the systems the Geeks had been establishing before the Fall of Earth.

Hundreds of sublight ore freighters buzzed around, convoying newly-mined material from the asteroid belt to the shipyards surrounding the planet, while civilian ships ran from her fleet. Very few commercial skippers would stick around anywhere where the missiles might start flying — after all, they might be mistaken for decoys, Q-Ships or even arsenal ships — and as she watched, most of them flickered out on random vectors. It looked as if most of them were heading for the nearest star systems, but *that* was hardly a surprise. If nothing else, passing on the warning to Wilhelm's friends and allies might earn them enough to save them from bankruptcy

She pulled up the data on Cottbus itself and scrolled through it rapidly. Admiral Wilhelm had been busy. Unless she was much mistaken — and she forwarded the probe data to the team of analysts she'd brought along for this purpose — the shipyard had been expanded, while the defences had actually been improved. It was hard to be sure at such a distance, but it looked as if they were deploying free-floating missile racks and heavy-duty energy weapons platforms, adding to the sheer firepower that they could deploy. Two squadrons of superdreadnaughts, floating protectively near the shipyard, completed the defences… or did they?

"Hubert, run an analysis on those freighters in Section Fifty-Seven," she ordered, coolly. They stood out — no one in their right mind would keep freighters somewhere within range of missiles, unless they weren't freighters — and she had a sneaking suspicion that they were actually arsenal ships. "While you're at it, run a readiness check on their defences and report to me."

She defocused the display and watched as the system continued to unfold, leaving a mystery. A Sector Fleet commonly had three superdreadnaught squadrons to provide the final resort for any Admiral. Admiral Wilhelm hadn't forwarded the ships to Morrison, so where was the final superdreadnaught squadron? They could be lurking somewhere in interplanetary space, their drives and shields stepped down to make detection difficult, or they could be elsewhere. The latter made little sense — he knew there would be some kind of reaction from the Provisional Government, unless he had an unreasonable amount of faith in Carola — but the former wasn't that smart either. It was almost as if he were tempting her to attack.

"Those freighters may be arsenal ships or Q-Ships, although I suspect the former," the tactical officer said, slowly. "I don't think that they would put Q-Ships in the line of battle for any reason, unless they were desperate, and in any case they don't have any of the little tips you learn to watch for."

And most pirates never get that chance, Katy thought, coldly. "And their readiness?"

"It's hard to be sure at this distance," the tactical officer said, "but I'd put them at ninety percent, at least. Their superdreadnaughts alone are at roughly ninety-five percent, while their smaller ships range from one hundred percent to ninety-two percent."

Katy scowled. The Imperial Navy used a percentage system to rate the readiness of any given unit and most starships, particularly before the rebellion, had rated out as around seventy percent. The Morrison Sector Fleet had been lucky to rate forty percent… and that was only through carefully ignoring certain parts of the evidence. The Shadow Fleet had tried to reach ninety-nine percent for all of its units, but clearly Admiral Wilhelm had had similar ideas. Free of the restraints of the Thousand Families, like Colin and Katy herself, he had had the chance to put his ideas into practice.

We're not going to get a helpful mutiny here, she thought, grimly. The rate of successful mutinies had fallen after the Empire had instituted a harsh new regime; everywhere, but Morrison. There, Joshua had treated his crews decently and humanly… and had been rewarded with loyalty. It looked as if Admiral Wilhelm had been reading Joshua's notes on the subject and added a few refinements of his own.

She keyed her console. "Minister Goscinny, please report to the Flag Deck," she ordered. They couldn't delay much longer. Soon, they would be committed to engagement range of the planet and its defenders. "It's time to contact Admiral Wilhelm directly."

Goscinny reached the Flag Bridge surprisingly quickly for a person who hadn't been used to superdreadnaughts, but then, she *had* advised him to learn his way around the massive ship. The Geeks had wanted to design starships that were far simpler — one of them had used the word *elegant* — but experienced officers had talked them out of it. It suited the crews that the vital sections of the ship — the bridge, engineering and life support — were harder to reach than it seemed. Goscinny had been reluctant to spend time on the bridge or the Flag Deck, claiming to be worried about the effects of pushing the wrong button, but Katy had insisted that he join her for the first contact. If nothing else, she wanted to hear what he said to Admiral Wilhelm.

"Plot out a standard firing pattern for multi-missiles," she ordered curtly. If it came down to blows, she wanted to inflict as much damage as she could in the opening rounds. Cottbus was more than adequately defended by the old rules, but Admiral Wilhelm could hardly be prepared for all the weapons in her arsenal. "Lock them in on first and second-rank targets."

"Aye, Admiral," the tactical officer said. His hands flew across the console. "Targeting pattern building now."

Katy turned and smiled up at Goscinny. The Gaul looked more worried than she had expected, pale and sweating rather than arrogant and confident. She was tempted to insist on making the first transmission herself, rather than sending another impression of weakness, but they'd already agreed that Goscinny would make the transmission and offer Admiral Wilhelm an out, provided he was smart enough to accept it. Katy gritted her teeth as Goscinny took his position. She understood the logic of amnesty, even to spiders and worms, but it didn't sit well with her. She would have preferred to systematically separate Wilhelm's arms and legs from his body, and then throw what was left into space.

"Open channel," she ordered. "Minister, you're on."

"This is Minister René Goscinny, representing the Provisional Government of the Empire," Goscinny said. Katy allowed herself a moment of surprise. Goscinny hadn't sounded weak at all. She'd forgotten that he'd grown up on a democratic world and his position had relied upon convincing others to vote for him. It was something very few people in the Empire had experience doing. "I speak directly to Admiral Wilhelm.

"Two months ago, starships from the Imperial Navy entered this system to convoy the news of the change of governments and bring Cottbus into the new system," he continued, his voice as hard and cold as stone. "Those starships were treacherously attacked and destroyed by your forces. One survived to bring back the news of your actions to Earth. This force is here to hold you to account for your actions."

He paused before carrying on. "Your representative" — they'd agreed that Carola would be denied the title of *Ambassador* — "has argued that Cottbus is an independent state, having freed itself from the yoke of the Empire, under your control. If that were indeed the case, an admission that the Provisional Government is not prepared to make, your actions would constitute an act of war. We would be justified in investing, invading and occupying Cottbus and any other worlds that followed your banner. We do not accept that version of events.

"These are our demands. You will immediately stand down all starships, orbital weapons and other defences. You will permit them to be occupied by armed Marines who will place them under supervision until the true status of Cottbus can be decided. You will inform us of the true situation within this sector and assist us in establishing civil order, before welcoming the sector into the new Empire. Finally, you will assist us in a full and independent inquest into exactly what happened when our cruisers were destroyed."

He paused. "If you comply with our demands, we are prepared to offer you and anyone else within your crews amnesty under the terms

of the Macore Agreement," he said. Katy, who was about the only person on the ship who would appreciate the irony, smiled darkly. Macore had not been happy about the amnesty agreement. "You would no longer be permitted to serve in the Imperial Navy, or as part of the political structure and government, but you would be permitted to remain free and independent. Your wealth, however acquired, will not be confiscated. Your families will not suffer for your actions. You could live a free and happy life."

His eyes met Katy's eyes. "If you refuse to accept our demands, or choose to ignore this message, we will open fire," he concluded. "If you choose to fight, the deal will be withdrawn and you will be treated as a war criminal. We await your reply."

Katy nodded. The communications officer transmitted the signal. "That was harder than I thought," Goscinny admitted, quietly. "I don't like pushing people into corners."

"Nor do I," Katy said, looking at the display. The red lines that indicated engagement range were growing closer to the fleet. "I also don't like the look of those defences. If we can talk him into standing down, rather than fighting… well, it's worth swallowing a little pride."

Goscinny blinked. "You don't think he's going to stand down, do you?"

Katy shook her head.

The minutes ticked away as the fleet drew closer to the planet. As close as they were, the signals shouldn't have been delayed more than a minute at most. She ran the calculation in her head and decided that ten minutes would be more than long enough for Admiral Wilhelm to decide on a response and transmit it, but she mentally decided that fifteen minutes would be enough leeway. She doubted that he would be feeling very happy after hearing the signal, but she found it hard to care. He *had* killed several hundred of her fellow crewmen, after all.

Goscinny leaned over to her. "Should it be taking this long?"

"No," Katy muttered back. The closer they got to Cottbus, the louder the nagging feeling at the back of her neck kept shouting at her. The odds were that it was a trap, but she had no intention of flying into point blank range of a fortress. The system defences could be battered to death before they could hope to fire a missile back at her ships. "Communications, repeat the message."

"Aye, Admiral," the communications officer said. He worked his console quickly. "Message sent."

The tactical officer broke into her thoughts. "Admiral, the probes are picking up a standard warning message from the planet's defence grid," he said. Katy could hear the puzzlement in his voice. When she pulled the data from the computers herself, she shared it. A standard

warning message made little sense. She couldn't even recall *seeing* one, outside exercises. "They're just transmitting it randomly towards us."

"A warning message?" Goscinny asked. "What are they warning us about?"

"Unknown," Katy said. She felt herself tensing again. "Communications, open a channel."

She waited for the communications officer's signal. "This is Admiral Garland of the Imperial Navy," she said. It felt so *good* to be blunt and direct. "You have chosen to ignore our previous signals. I therefore have no choice, but to assume that you have hostile intentions. Stand down your shields, weapons and drives *now*, or I will open fire. There will be no further warnings."

"Targeting scans," the tactical officer snapped. "We just got pinged by the orbital defences. They swept the fleet and then faded."

Katy nodded. She'd expected as much. Hell, she'd operated under the assumption that the defenders knew where each of her starships was at any time. Their drive fields alone would see to that. They couldn't be concealed without a full-spectrum cloaking device.

"Bring up our own active sensors and sweep the system," she ordered. She keyed a single command into her console and leaned forward. "Prepare to open fire…"

"Missile tracks," the tactical officer snapped. The display sparkled with hostile red icons. "We're taking fire!"

At least that settles the question of hostile intent, Katy thought. "All ships, bring up the point defence network," she ordered. There was something about the entire situation that didn't quite make sense, but there was no longer time to think, only to react. "Fire at will."

Chapter Twenty

"Deploy the outermost pods," Admiral Wilhelm ordered. There hadn't been any more time to delay. The voice of the rebel fleet's commander had convinced him of that. It would have been nice to close the range a little more, but she wouldn't allow him to lead her by the nose any further. "Fire at will."

The display flickered and updated rapidly as the pods fired their missiles. The idea of missile pods hadn't been a new one, but they simply hadn't been a workable concept, until now. The Nerds had invented the concept and, for reasons that made little sense to Admiral Wilhelm, had kept them back rather than introducing them to the rebels. He didn't understand that — and he didn't understand why they had come to him and offered their support — but he needed them. They had provided his fleet with something an Imperial Navy fleet had lacked after First Harmony; technological equality. Maybe even, they'd hinted, superiority.

He smiled as the missiles raced towards their targets. The Nerds had solved a problem that had bedevilled missile techs throughout the ages. A missile was too small to carry a power-generating unit — and in any case they were destroyed when they struck their targets — and so they had limited range and speed. A missile in sprint mode would burn out quickly, quickly enough to be useless except at close range, while a longer-ranged missile would be easier for the defender's point defence to target and destroyed. It was why the rebels had developed the arsenal ships in the first place. They overwhelmed their targets by sheer weight of numbers. The Nerds, however, had managed to extend a missile's range in sprint mode.

"Keep tracking their point defence and analyse it," he ordered, calmly. His heart was beating rapidly, as it always did when all of his theories and plans collapsed into a battle, but his voice was calm. "Security, what did you make of that transmission?"

His Security Officer, an old friend, frowned. Imperial Intelligence — and, for that matter, the Hohenzollern Clan, would have been horrified to learn how close Wilhelm and his Security Officer had become over the years. It had been another of Carola's ideas; she had introduced Jake Russell to the woman who would become his wife and encouraged the relationship. It had turned Jake from a sworn enemy — all Security Officers were the enemy until proven otherwise — into a friend and an ally. Wilhelm didn't know for sure, but he would bet his last credit that Colin Harper had had a similar arrangement. How else would he have gotten away with it for so long?

“It was odd, wasn’t it?” Jake agreed, calmly. He never sounded emotional over anything, but his wife. “It wasn’t a precise warning, just… a standard warning. I’ll start working on tracking down the person who sent the signal, but if it was programmed into the system, it could have been done weeks ago.”

Wilhelm nodded, stroking his chin thoughtfully. A standard warning was, by its nature, imprecise. It warned anyone approaching to use extreme care, on the assumption that there was danger ahead, but it was rarely used because there were more specific warning signals for almost any emergency. Any infiltrator on the shipyard could have sent a proper warning, if they knew about the plans for the ambush, but instead… they had been maddeningly imprecise. The rebel commander had to be completely puzzled.

“It’s possible that Imperial Intelligence had a sleeper on the shipyard they never told me about,” Jake hazarded, after a long moment. “They could have programmed him to remain out of the way until he was needed… and the rebels might have recovered the proper command codes to make use of his services.”

“Leave it for the moment,” Wilhelm said, watching the display. If they lost the battle, the activity of one or a thousand infiltration agents wouldn’t change their fate. “I suggest that you concentrate your efforts on supervising the evacuation and track down the spies later.”

He’d planned for that as well. A shipyard wasn’t just the facilities, although they were important and cost time and money to build, but also the workforce. The thousands of trained men and women who worked on the shipyard — and now far more motivated after he’d had incompetents who’d gained their positions through connections weeded out ruthlessly — had to be preserved. If the war went well, they’d be needed to expand the shipyards… and if it went badly, they became a bargaining chip. He could even follow the Nerds suggestion and send them to hidden facilities along the Rim.

“Understood,” Jake said. “Good luck.”

Wilhelm snorted and turned back to the display. The rebel fleet might have been surprised — although he doubted it — but they’d reacted well. He’d taken care to have the missile pods aimed at the superdreadnaughts, although striking the smaller ships would have guaranteed several kills, and the rebels were taking ruthless advantage of that ‘mistake.’ Their smaller craft, bristling with point defence weapons and tactical sensors, were wiping missiles out of space by the hundreds, despite their speed. They’d improved their targeting, he saw, just as the Nerds had predicted. It made him wonder what else they’d improved.

Gunboats, bristling with point defence weapons themselves, sped

ahead of the main fleet, hunting for the semi-stealthed pods. He had to admire the bravery of the crews, even if they were on the opposite side; a popular Imperial Navy joke had it that most gunboats couldn't even fart loudly in their own defence. They wouldn't be any match for a destroyer, let alone anything bigger, but they made useful additional point defence platforms and scouts, if only because they were so completely expendable.

"The gunboats are engaging some of the missile pods," the tactical officer reported. "Do you want me to flush the remaining pods?"

Wilhelm nodded once. The pods would be easy targets for any prowling gunboat. "If they're targeted, yes," he ordered. "Try and pick off a handful of the gunboats with the energy buoys if they can take them out. If not, leave them to their work. They're just wasting energy if they shoot up empty pods."

He smiled. A missile pod that had expended all its missiles was useless, at least until it could be recovered and reloaded. They were such simple creations that the orbiting industrial facilities would be able to produce thousands more within a week, if he ordered them; the real bottleneck would be the missiles. The fleet had an insatiable demand that would only grow larger as the war progressed.

"And keep scanning their fleet and locating every ship," he added. "The information will come in handy when we spring the trap."

* * *

Katy frowned as she studied the display, trying to understand what she was seeing. For someone who was regarded as competent, if not dangerously competent, there was a certain degree of incompetence around Admiral Wilhelm's defences. On one side, he had introduced a new and terrifying range of missiles, capable of entering sprint mode for longer… and on the other side, he hadn't even used them properly. A mass attack on her superdreadnaughts, targeting one or two for preference, might have inflicted damage, but instead he'd fired them off in fits and starts. She'd wondered if the first attack had been a mistake, as insane as it seemed, but the pattern was only continuing.

The *Jefferson* lunched as it launched another spread of probes down towards the planet. Whatever was going on with the missile pods — if that was what they were — wasn't affecting Admiral Wilhelm's point defence. They'd picked off several probes already and the ECM surrounding the shipyard and the orbital fortresses was massive, almost as good as their own. That wasn't something she'd

expected and it worried her. If Admiral Wilhelm had made one major advance and duplicated one of the Geeks advances, what else had his people managed to duplicate?

They couldn't have had Carola copy them from Earth, she thought, slowly. *Even if she managed to gain access, they wouldn't have had time to put them all into production, which suggests that they either developed them on their own or someone else boosted their technology. Who?*

She pushed the line of thought aside as unproductive, and distracting in a combat zone, and turned back to the display. The fleet was still battering its way through the missile pods, but the gunboats were wiping them out, often before they could fire. A handful of gunboats had been lost, one of them to a missile pod that had fired on the tiny starships, but the remainder were still active. She'd half-expected Admiral Wilhelm to detach a squadron of destroyers to deal with the gunboats, but he had resisted the bait and allowed her craft to continue clearing the defences out of their way.

The superdreadnaught shivered as a single missile struck home against the shield, it's comrades wiped out by the point defence network. Alone, it couldn't hope to do anything beyond making the ship shake, but she checked the readouts anyway, wondering if Admiral Wilhelm had breeched the taboo on antimatter. The sensors reported that it was a standard nuclear warhead, perhaps designed to weaken her shields without damaging the starship significantly, but she couldn't escape the feeling that something was waiting for her to make a mistake.

"Admiral, the gunboats have reported that they have cleared all of the threatening missile pods," the tactical officer said, breaking into her thoughts. "The Squadron Commander is requesting permission to clear the unthreatening pods out of the way before they can become a threat."

An hour ago, Katy would have dismissed the possibility, but now there was little choice, but to clear all of the possible threats. "Order them to engage at will, but be prepared to return to the fleet at any moment," she ordered, calmly. It wasn't as if the gunboats would be any help if there were a major clash of starships, although their contribution to the point defence would be severely missed. "Bring up the targeting pattern and prepare to engage the fortresses."

The tactical officer blinked. "The fortresses, Admiral?"

"The fortresses," Katy said. The superdreadnaughts were a serious threat under other circumstances, but the fortresses were actually more dangerous within a gravity shadow… and she had no intention of entering the gravity shadow until the fortresses had been disabled or destroyed. Besides, if she were reading Admiral Wilhelm rightly, he would be commanding from one of the fortresses. It was just possible

that they would decapitate the enemy command structure. “Analysis Team, have you located the enemy command and control centre?”

“Negative,” the analysis officer reported, through the intercom. “The enemy units are using heavily and randomly encrypted communications. Their command centre cannot be located.”

So they’ve learned that trick, Katy thought, sourly. Back during the early days of the rebellion, the Empire had kept the standard fleet control networks in operation, despite the fact they pointed the flagship out clearly to anyone with the right technology. The analysts didn’t have to know what the ships were saying to one another to locate the one that was giving the orders… and decapitate the squadron permanently. The standard Imperial Navy squadron was a hornet’s nest of rivalries, jealousies and worse. In the time it would take for the Captains to sort out who was in command of the remainder of the squadron it would have been reduced by several more ships. Sometimes, according to surviving records, it had been the destruction of additional ships that had terminated the infighting. No good deed went unpunished.

“Never mind,” she said. They were coming right along the edge of the gravity shadow now, poised to dive down towards the planet and the web of orbital industries. “Confirm firing patterns?”

“Confirmed,” the tactical officer said. “Missiles locked on targets…”

“Fire,” Katy ordered.

The arsenal ships rolled and fired the first salvo of multi-missiles down towards the planet… and the fortresses orbiting the blue-green globe.

* * *

Unlike Joshua Wachter, who had been caught out by the same trick at Second Morrison, Admiral Wilhelm had had the sensor records to prove that missiles with such impossible ranges actually existed, even without the warning from the Nerds. He’d deployed so much additional point defence, at least in part, to cope with just such an offensive, expecting one to materialise if it came to blows. Why, he’d asked his fellow Admirals, would the rebels *fail* to use such an effective weapon, particularly when they *knew* that there was no chance of facing it themselves?

“Deploy point defence drones and ECM,” he ordered, as the impossible missiles raged down towards two of his fortresses. The rebels had, through the luck of the draw, managed to avoid engaging both his command fortresses, much to his relief. If he allowed them to

locate him, the *next* attack would be focused on him personally. "Contact the *Avid* and order it to flicker out, now."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. The *Avid*, a destroyer that seemed to be trying to remain away from the fighting, flickered out and vanished from the display. The rebels probably wouldn't notice in the fury of the fighting… and even if they did, they wouldn't understand its significance.

"Commit the remaining point defence units to the defence of Fortress #10 and Fortress #11," Wilhelm continued, turning to the tactical officer. They were playing for time, now, and even as the missiles stormed towards the two fortresses, the rebels had their neck in his noose. "Commit everything we have, apart from the superdreadnaughts. They are to remain where they are."

The rebel commander hadn't done it badly, he noted, with a reluctant flicker of admiration. He had never heard of an Admiral Garland, although the name was familiar from one of the war reports he'd read, but she'd played her cards well. He might have had more point defence than anyone, but a supremely paranoid and resourceful officer would have deployed, but she'd managed to neutralise most of it just by firing from her position. He would have to alter some of the platforms to force them to engage… and that would reveal their positions ahead of time.

Interesting, he thought. The trick was impressive… and, in hindsight, rather crude. *I wonder what else she has up her sleeves.*

The timing seemed skewed, just because of the long-range missiles, but finally they flashed into point defence range. The timing wasn't quite perfect this time, he noted with a flash of triumph; his point defence weapons were picking off several of the multi-missiles before they had a chance to deploy. They vanished in bright sparks of fire, dancing just at the edge of perception, before the remainder multiplied into a wave of onrushing destruction. The fortresses and their supporting point defence were firing rapidly now, using everything from pulsars to their heavy fission beams to sweep hundreds of missiles out of space, but still they came on. Several hundred missiles survived to slam against Fortress #10… and the entire structure vaporised in a blinding flash.

Fortress #11 was luckier. Only a relative handful of missiles survived to strike him, but their cumulative effect was to knock down the shields and ram into the hull. If it had been a superdreadnaught, he thought numbly, it would have been an expanding ball of plasma by now, but the monstrous armour protecting the fortress held most of the effects contained, barely. The interior of the fortress, for the crew lucky enough to survive, would reassemble hell. The fortress might not have been destroyed, but looking at it, Wilhelm suspected that

they would have to scrap it and build a new one from scratch.

Jake sounded as stunned as he looked. “How many more of those missiles do they have?”

Wilhelm shrugged. The Nerds had confirmed something he’d suspected; the rebel superdreadnaughts couldn’t fire the missiles, which meant that they had to deploy them from arsenal ships. They’d fired off roughly a third of the arsenal ships in their fleet, which might allow them two more comparable attacks, unless they hadn’t expended all of the missiles in the first ships.

“I have no idea,” he said, truthfully. He looked over at the timer. There were only a few minutes left. “It won’t matter much longer anyway.”

* * *

“Target One destroyed,” the tactical officer said. The satisfaction in his voice was unmistakable. “Target Two effectively destroyed.”

Katy nodded. Judging by the confused readings spilling off the fortress, the missiles might not have destroyed it outright, but they’d left it a burned-out shell. The shipyard below might be able to repair it, but she’d be astonished if it took them less than six months. Her engineers would have a look at the remains after they’d won the battle.

“Retarget the remaining missiles on the next pair of fortresses,” she ordered, calmly. It was a wasteful exercise in missiles, but not in lives. The missiles were replaceable, while the lives were not, an argument that made perfect sense to her. She would almost hate it when they ended up budgeting properly for military supplies again. “Prepare to…”

“That’s odd,” the sensor officer said. He was peering down at his console, working frantically to see through the sensor distortions caused by the exchange of fire. “Admiral, I have something odd here.”

Katy pulled up the results on her own display, but they made little sense to her. It might have been a sensor ghost, one caused by the presence of so many starships, or it might have been something more sinister.

“Report,” she snapped. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure,” the sensor officer admitted. His inexperience was showing, Katy saw, but she had no time for it. A more experienced officer might have made a guess and stood by it. “It looks almost like turbulence…”

Katy felt her blood run cold. “Launch a spread of probes, full active, towards the source of that disturbance…”

“Too late,” the tactical officer said.
The display filled with angry red icons.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Fire!"

The plan had sounded simple on paper, but Admiral Wolfsan had worried that it wouldn't be so easy when it came to actually implementing it. In his experience, the simpler the plan, the better… and Admiral Wilhelm's plan for engaging the Imperial Navy — or the rebel fleet, depending on the terminology — was too complex for certain victory. He'd watched the fleet nervously as the superdreadnaught had crept closer and closer to their positions, but they'd managed to get into firing range undetected.

"Missiles away, sir," the tactical officer reported, as the superdreadnaught shuddered violently, firing her missiles in anger for the first time in her entire career. A superdreadnaught was rarely called on to do more than show the flag along the Rim — no pirate in their right mind would tangle with a superdreadnaught — but Wolfsan had insisted on regular drills anyway. Combined with the firepower of the other superdreadnaughts, and the massive arsenal ships, the rebels had flown right into a firestorm.

He leaned back and surveyed the position. The rebels hadn't moved into the gravity shadow, but if they'd timed it right, they shouldn't have been able to flicker out before the first wave of missiles struck them anyway. They hadn't fired back on his ships, missing the chance to inflict serious damage before his forces could raise their shields, which argued that they had indeed been completely surprised. In hindsight, they had to be cursing themselves, but Admiral Wilhelm had played them beautifully. Even now, they had to be seriously considering fighting it out, or headlong retreat, and either one suited them just fine.

"Reload and fire a second barrage," he ordered, calmly. The arsenal ships and the external racks had both shot themselves dry, but his superdreadnaughts were only just beginning. By the time the rebels reacted, they would have already lost. "Locate their command ship and target it specifically."

* * *

For a long moment, Katy's mind just froze, trapped in memories of First Morrison. The Shadow Fleet had been trapped there, forced to stand off a wave of missiles rather than flickering out and running for their lives, and she'd been captured there. The display's frantic attempts to inform her of just how badly she'd miscalculated — and

she *had* miscalculated — only made matters worse. Admiral Wilhelm had laid a trap for her and she had walked right into it like a Midshipwoman on her first cruise.

"Lock the arsenal ships onto their superdreadnaughts and fire them dry," she snapped. One eye flew to the display showing the countdown to flickering out; two minutes. By then, they were going to take at least one beating, perhaps two. Her overconfidence had trapped her until her ships could spin up their drives and escape, trapped her long enough for her fleet to be bled. "Spin the superdreadnaughts and return fire, now!"

Jefferson shuddered as the mighty superdreadnaught fired its first salvo towards the enemy ships. Katy watched, pushing her fear and shock to the back of her mind, as the enemy fleet resolved into view. Their cloaking devices were far better than they should have had — she should have seen them coming — and they'd played their cards very well. The fleet list was terrifying. The enemy had deployed *sixty-six* superdreadnaughts, seventy battlecruisers and heavy cruisers, backed up by over two hundred escorts. Studying the sensor records, she realised that at least some of the escorts had been configured for point defence service, adding yet another advantage to the enemy fleet. The calculations about relative strength had just been proven so much scrap paper.

They must have brought in ships from the other sectors, she realised, numbly. The hell of it was that she could still inflict horrendous damage on the enemy forces… if she were prepared to accept the total destruction of her fleet. They might have had external racks and arsenal ships, two more items she'd hoped were a rebel monopoly, but they didn't have the firepower or survivability of the *Independence*-class ships. She could bully her way down to the shipyard and annihilate it, or even scorch the planet herself, but it would mean the destruction of her fleet. The Shadow Fleet simply couldn't afford such losses.

"Turn us away from the planet," she ordered, watching as the point defence network was frantically reshuffled to handle the oncoming storm. They'd configured it to intercept missiles coming from Cottbus and its orbital installations, not missiles coming from the other side of the formation, and they'd been caught badly out of place. The enemy might not have known it — and she wouldn't have bet her life on it — but they'd caught her with her pants around her ankles. If they'd timed it right, she wouldn't be able to bring over half her point defence into play until it was too late.

She cleared her throat. "Deploy all of the ECM drones and sensor ghosts," she ordered, knowing that it was probably futile. The dumb little brains in the onrushing missiles might be tricked, but if they had

direct feeds back to their motherships they would adapt and compensate for her trickery. “Lock missiles onto the surviving enemy superdreadnaughts” — *and there are going to be dozens of them*, her mind gibbered inanely — “and prepare to engage them.”

The wall of missiles flashed into the teeth of her point defence. Gunboats, the fastest ships under her command, flew into the onrushing wave of missiles and started to pick them off, one by one. Their laser cannons and pulsars blew missile after missile into flaming dust, while their sensors burned through the ECM-equipped missiles that were trying to confuse the point defence, but there were too many missiles to be stopped that easily. They raged on into the destroyers, hundreds more flashing out of existence as they were struck by bolts of charged plasma or counter-missiles, while dozens more were decoyed away onto harmless drones. Some of the missiles even targeted the destroyers, blasting away some of her point defence platforms, wiping out entire ships before they could escape.

Katy gritted her teeth. “This is the Admiral,” she said, keying the intercom. “All hands, brace for impact. I repeat, brace for impact.”

The superdreadnaught’s point defence opened fire as the missiles roared into their terminal attack vectors, boosting their drives forward as they sought mutual annihilation. The lights dimmed slightly as power was redirected to fission beams and other energy weapons, sweeping missile after missile out of space, but it wasn’t enough. Katy barely had a moment to grab the handles of her chair before the first missile struck home. A rolling series of thunderclaps shook the mighty ship.

“Report,” she snapped. Nasty-looking red icons had flashed up on the display, but nothing seemed to be failing dramatically. Of course, part of her mind whispered, if a fusion bottle had failed dramatically, the entire ship would have been so much vapour by now. “Damage report!”

“Minor damage,” the engineering officer said. Katy barely heard the details as she glared down at the enemy fleet in the display. They were struggling to survive her missiles, but they had far more ships than she had. “Admiral…?”

“Get the repair teams on it,” Katy snapped, and broke the connection. Either they could flicker out and escape within a minute, or they were dead. There was no middle ground, not this time. She refused to even consider surrender. There was no way she could allow a reasonably intact *Independence* to fall into enemy hands. “Tactical, fleet report?”

“We lost seven superdreadnaughts,” the tactical officer said, grimly. Katy looked at the display and winced again. She’d thought that the *Jefferson* was the focus of the enemy’s attack — that,

somehow, they'd locked onto her as the flagship — but no, they'd barely been harmed. Other starships were sending damage reports, some of them far more serious… and seven superdreadnaughts and nine other ships were gone. "The enemy fleet lost four superdreadnaughts, but nine more are significantly damaged."

Katy glanced at the timer. Thirty seconds to flicker. "Target their undamaged superdreadnaughts and open fire," she ordered. There were still enough superdreadnaughts to seriously damage the enemy fleet, even though the battle would now sink down into more conventional patterns. "Contact all ships. As soon as the flicker drives are ready, we flicker out to the first waypoint!"

"Understood, Admiral," the communications officer said. "Signal sent."

* * *

There was a curious detachment, Admiral Wilhelm decided, to watching missiles raging in on ships that didn't happen to carry his person onboard. They might have been his ships, under his command, but his life wasn't at stake. It gave him a unique opportunity to study the rebel improvements in missile technology in action, while allowing him to remain out of the fighting.

"They've managed to improve their jammers," he commented, to no one in particular. The point defence systems were being confused and forced to rely on their active sensors to track the incoming missiles, which in turn allowed to the rebels to confuse them still further with false returns. A handful of the missiles, he decided, would carry enhanced ECM warheads to confuse his systems, far more capable than the ones he'd put into production. The Nerds had either held the systems back, or they hadn't known. He wasn't sure which possibility worried him more.

His ships engaged the rebel missiles with their point defence. The sensor confusion meant that they had to engage every target… and, because of the relative sizes of the missiles, it was impossible to tell if they'd engaged a sensor ghost or just managed to miss a real missile. Wilhelm had seen a study once, conducted back during the days before the rebellion, that concluded that point defence weapons wasted ten shots for every shot that actually hit a target — it had been suppressed, of course. In the Battle of Cottbus, as he'd already named it in his head, he would have been surprised if they weren't wasting nineteen shots out of every twenty.

"Impact imminent," the tactical officer said, calmly. "They're passing through the final line of defences now."

I should have developed gunboats, Wilhelm thought coldly, as the missiles raged down on his superdreadnaughts. He had had the technology — they weren't a great improvement on standard gunboats — but they required willing pilots, not men and women who suspected that they were being sent out to die. The death rates for gunboats that entered combat were horrendous… and he wasn't comfortable asking for that much loyalty from his people. After all, if Colin Harper could rebel, who was to say that one of his subordinates couldn't rebel either?

The display updated rapidly as the missiles struck home, reporting in cold clinical terms what was happening to the superdreadnaughts. He pushed the thought that they were crewed by living men and women, some vaporised with their ships, others desperately trying to survive as the air blew out into space, out of his mind. The damage was mounting, but they weren't capitalising on their previous successes.

"Interesting," he mused to Jake. "Why aren't they finishing off the damaged ships?"

As soon as he asked the question, he knew the answer. The rebel commander, Katy Garland — one of his analysts had finally identified her as a former Commander, back with the Macore Observation Squadron before the rebellion — had realised that they couldn't wipe out his fleet, so she was trying to inflict as much damage on his force as possible before she retreated. She had to be powering up her drives now, having decided to leave them on standby rather than permanently powered up and active, and trying to win time.

Time I am not going to give her, he thought, and smiled.

"General signal to 5th and 7th Squadron," he ordered. He'd kept them deep within the gravity shadow, partly because that was what the raiding cruisers would have seen, right back at the beginning, and partly to keep her from becoming suspicious. "They are to advance at once upon the enemy."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said. His hands danced across his console. "Message transmitted and understood."

Wilhelm leaned back in his chair and watched, a slight smile flickering around the corners of his mouth, as two fresh squadrons of superdreadnaughts, complete with Nerd-designed external racks, started to advance upon the enemy fleet.

* * *

"Admiral, the planetary squadrons have just become active," the tactical officer said. "They're leaving orbit and heading up towards

our position."

"Neat," Katy commented, sourly. It was easy to see what Admiral Wilhelm was doing, but it was going to be too late. If she had considered a death ride into Cottbus's gravity shadow, intent on destroying the shipyard at all costs, she would have launched it before the incoming fleet could intervene. She glanced up at the display and scowled. The incoming missiles had tapered off slightly now that all of the external racks had been shot dry, but the enemy still had over forty completely intact and undamaged superdreadnaughts. She barely had a ship that hadn't taken damage. "Confirm; the entire fleet can flicker?"

"Apparently so," the tactical officer said. He glanced down at his console. "Flicker capability in ten seconds."

Another wave of missiles struck home against the *Jefferson's* shields. They held, barely, against enough fury to burn off half a planet, but the starship couldn't take much more of that. The hammering was burning holes in the shields and unleashing the primal power of nuclear warheads against her ship. The *Jefferson* was going to need weeks, at least, in a yard before she was fit for combat action again… and there was no suitable yard short of Earth itself. The facilities at Hawthorn simply weren't up to the task.

Katy counted down the seconds in her head. "Flicker," she ordered, finally. "Get us out of here."

The fleet vanished from the universe.

* * *

"Interesting," Admiral Wilhelm said, as the final rebel ship flickered out and was gone. "Did you notice how well they held together?"

Jake frowned. "I can't say that I did," he said, finally. He was many things, not all of them decent or useful, but he wasn't a space combat expert. "I'll just take your word for it."

Wilhelm barely heard him. "They could have broken up into a mob of disorganised ships, or they could have scattered and broken under our beating, but they held together long enough to retreat," he said, slowly. "We killed forty-seven ships, including eleven superdreadnaughts, and they still didn't break. They fought like men, Jake, not rebels."

Jake lifted an eyebrow. "It's a little late to have doubts," he pointed out. "They might have been sincere about offering you and yours amnesty before the shooting started, but right now I'd say that Admiral Garland's most earnest desire is your head on a platter. How

many of their people do you think we killed?"

"Not enough," Wilhelm said. He looked over at the communications officer. "Compress all of our basic sensor records and transmit them to the *Robin Hood* before she departs," he ordered. "She has a long trip ahead of her."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Do you think the *Robin Hood* will get there on time?"

"We can, but hope," Wilhelm said. He actually thought that the odds were very good, but there was no way to know for sure. "Carola needs to know what's happened here before something unfortunate happens to her on Earth."

* * *

"Well," Charlie said, from his position in the cockpit. "I guess that's us told, right?"

"Shut up," Sandra said, not unkindly. "Who was it who did all the work to get that signal sent out?"

"Some signal," Charlie said, angrily. "One warning signal, a non-specific one at that. Do you think that your… *Andy* will even survive long enough to come back to you next week?"

"You know as well as I do," Sasha said, tiredly, "that hypnotics are tricky things."

"Not *that* tricky," Charlie said. He tapped the console and brought up the message. Cottbus System Command had laid down the law in no uncertain terms. No starships, passenger, commercial or anything else, would be permitted to leave the planet without special permission. He doubted that it would last that long — the embargo would hurt their economy badly — but it was long enough to prevent them from flying to meet Admiral Garland, assuming that she had survived the battle. "You know what we just saw, right?"

The other two stared at him angrily. "We saw an enemy force that won't be stopped quickly and easily and can tear up this entire sector and ravish all the way to Earth before the Provisional Government gets its act together and gathers a force capable of ripping it apart," he said. "We're behind enemy lines, officially. We can't get off this planet without being blown to bits. And, because of that warning, they probably know we're here."

"And they might find Andy," Sandra said. Her voice was a parody of concern. "So what?"

"So they find him and they take him into a holding cell and they strap him down and they go through his mind with a fine-toothed comb until he's a drooling idiot and they know everything he does

about you," Charlie snapped. "You said it yourself. Hypnotics are tricky things. The odds are that they will apply enough pressure to his tiny mind to find out what he remembers about you."

"And again, so what?"

"He will remember fucking your brains out," Charlie snapped. "They, on the other hand, will wonder just what actually happened. What is the difference between fantasy and reality anyway? When he tells them that he fucked you while you were both dead drunk… they're going to know that he's giving them false memories."

He tapped the side of the console sharply. "We don't have much time," he said. "Our missile has changed from surveillance and intelligence-gathering to active operations — now, before they locate us and move in for the kill. The way this damn planet is organised… that won't be very long at all."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The first waypoint was only a light-year outside the Cottbus System. In theory, it should have been impossible for Admiral Wilhelm to track them to the waypoint, but Katy wasn't in the mode to take chances. As soon as the entire surviving fleet flickered into the first waypoint, she ordered them to flicker directly to the second waypoint, before they paused to take stock. It wasn't good news.

"We went into battle with twenty-seven superdreadnaughts," she said, finally. Goscinny, she was relieved to see, looked just as stunned as she was. She'd been expecting a round of second-guessing — she rather expected she would face the same once she returned to Earth — but instead he looked merely stunned. If he'd been on a space yacht, as he'd wanted, he would have probably been killed. "We escaped with eleven destroyed and seven more badly damaged. I would prefer not to take them into combat if I could avoid it."

Goscinny looked up at her, his eyes wide. "*Can* you avoid it?"

"I don't know," Katy said. She pulled up a starchart of the Cottbus Sector and scowled at it. Assuming that Admiral Wilhelm and his allies controlled all of the uncontacted sectors, as well as Cottbus itself, they would have enough firepower to pose a serious threat to the Shadow Fleet. Colin would have taken steps to ensure that extra firepower would be rushed to the sector, if needed, but on interstellar scales that help would be very slow in coming. "He's not going to remain at Cottbus, that's for sure."

She got up and started to pace. "He deliberately set an ambush for us and blew hell out of my fleet," she said, aloud. Admitting even that much was painful, but there was no choice. At least this time no one had been left behind, which meant that Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't have anyone to probe for intelligence… although he might not have needed their help. "There is *no* way that the Provisional Government will let *that* pass."

"Don't forget trying to assassinate one of their members," Goscinny reminded her.

Katy smiled tiredly. She needed sleep and a long bath, but she wasn't going to get either of them. Her crewers would be working desperately to restore as much as they could, but she had to worry about the fleet… and the impact on the Empire. It was almost a relief to think about something else, but she couldn't do it for long.

"How true," she agreed, dryly. The Provisional Government would probably regard the death of one of their own more seriously than the death of thousands of her crewmembers. "I don't think they'll forget that in a hurry."

She looked back at the display and winced. “They’re going to attack Hawthorn,” she said, flatly. “They probably control the remaining Imperial Navy bases in their area of the Empire — fuck, there’s no way to know just how far their influence spreads, not yet. They have to take out Hawthorn for the same reason we had to take out Morrison, because it’s blocking their advance on Earth. The only difference is that their attack will succeed.”

Goscinny looked at her, shaken. “Are you sure?”

“They have the firepower to blast through the remains of their fleet and everything that Admiral Godwin has under his command,” Katy said, flatly. The memory of their confident departure from the planet was mocking her now. “They have to push their advantage as far as it will go and that means a drive on Earth. If they can capture and occupy Earth, that’s curtains for the Provisional Government and probably for the Empire. Admiral Wilhelm will inherit a ruin.”

“That’s not possible,” Goscinny said. “One fleet can’t do that much damage…?”

“Why not?” Katy asked him bleakly. “*We* did.”

She turned back to the display. “I have some harsh decisions to make, Minister,” she said. It had been the first time she’d used his title since they’d left Earth and it brought him up short. “I’m going to have to dispatch one of the destroyers, one of the intact ones, back to Earth. You’re going with it.”

Goscinny started to protest, but Katy spoke over him. She wasn’t interested in a debate. “It’s not arguable,” she said, firmly. He scowled at her, but held his peace. “You don’t have a purpose here any longer, not now that diplomacy has failed so… comprehensibly. You have to make them understand that we need everything we can held at Earth to defend the planet.”

“You don’t want reinforcements?”

“I’d *love* reinforcements,” Katy said, flatly. “I’m not going to get them. Colin is going to need them at Earth. I can’t hold anywhere short of the first-rank worlds, so I’m going to harass them as much as I can until they drive me out of the sector. I should be good at it. I did it during the early stages of the war before First Harmony, or even First Morrison. I want you to make sure that Colin understands that we’re not going to have a comprehensive defence line before Earth itself.”

“And the first-rank worlds?” Goscinny asked. His voice tightened noticeably. “What about Gaul?”

Katy felt a twinge of pity for him. She’d been glad to leave her own homeworld, but Goscinny had spent all his life serving a single world. He’d worked to preserve it from the Empire’s wrath… and, when that had failed, thrown himself into making the Provisional

Government work. Gaul had had a harsh lesson in the underlying truth of the Empire and Goscinny, at least, had never forgotten. The choice was between victory — permanent victory — or death.

"Gaul is on the other side of Earth," she said, choosing not to mention that if Admiral Wilhelm chose to waste his missiles on Gaul and the other first-rank worlds, it would only work in Colin's favour. She doubted that Goscinny would accept that argument as valid. It was far too cold-blooded for a man who had a deep attachment to his homeworld. "I think that it will be safe as long as Earth itself is safe."

She leaned forward. "I'll give you a copy of my preliminary report," she concluded. "Good luck."

She'd wondered if Goscinny would protest, or insist on remaining with the remains of 2nd Fleet, but instead he merely nodded. She was almost disappointed in him, although there was nothing he could do onboard the superdreadnaught, but get in the way. Besides, she *would* need him back on Earth, just to explain to Colin exactly what had happened.

Colin will understand, part of her mind whispered. He'd commanded at First Morrison, but who had he had looking over his shoulder? Only rebels whose survival and future, such as it was, depended on victory. He hadn't had a real Parliament, or civilians, who would demand a say in matters. *No one else will…*

The thought was unpleasant, but there was no point in avoiding it. A disaster of such magnitude — and she didn't delude herself as to the sheer scale of the disaster — meant that someone would have to take the blame… and, in the Empire, it would have been the highest-ranking person without powerful patrons. In Colin's new Empire, it would be her. The Provisional Government would second-guess everything she'd done and, eventually, demand her removal from command. It would almost be a relief.

She keyed her communicator as Goscinny was escorted out of her cabin to the shuttlebay, where he would board a shuttle and be transferred to the destroyer *Zipper*, along with some of her wounded. The sheer number of wounded crewmen, some of them seriously injured, had overwhelmed her stasis tubes, forcing her medical corpsmen to perfect emergency surgery under poor conditions. Her beautiful superdreadnaught had had its first baptism of fire.

And if I'd had the Havoc with me, she thought, *it would have been blown out of space*.

"Senior crew, status meeting, my office, thirty minutes," she ordered, and headed off to sickbay. The doctor would protest, of course, but he would give her the stimulant she needed. She would sleep it off later, assuming that there *was* a later. Until then…

* * *

"We lost over four hundred crewmen, either dead or injured, in the battle," Captain Chalker said. Katy listened to his words, keeping her face impassive while her insides twisted under the blow of his words. Each one felt like a knife in the gut. "Every one of the stasis tubes has been filled, while others have been injected with hibernation drugs and placed out of the way until…"

He allowed his voice to trail off. Katy wasn't sure why he wasn't blaming her for the death and destruction. She hadn't hesitated to blame incompetent superiors back before the rebellion… and it was what she deserved. She pushed the self-pity aside with an effort and focused on his words. Colin would probably relieve her of command, just to ensure that someone was publicly taking the blame, but until then her duty was to the men and women under her command. It wasn't something she could shirk.

"Overall, we're in better state than we deserve to be," he continued. "Engineering says that we took no fatal damage, so most of the damaged systems can be repaired or replaced, given enough time. The weapons mountings on part of the hull will have to be replaced — and, until then, we're looking at only eighty percent of our point defence being active. The missile tubes, at least, can be rapidly cleared and reloaded."

Katy nodded in honest relief. The interior of the superdreadnaught — any superdreadnaught — was mainly armour, power generation systems and weapons, with complex systems to move the missiles from their storage bays to their launch tubes. The Empire had pioneered superdreadnaught design hundreds of years ago and even a badly damaged superdreadnaught could still rotate missiles through the hull and fire them from undamaged tubes. The *Jefferson* could still fight, at least, although she wouldn't care to go into battle again without a short spell in a proper repair yard.

"We were the lucky ones," the tactical officer said. His voice hardened, despite some of the looks cast in his direction by the younger officers. They wouldn't have seen a defeated fleet before. "The remaining superdreadnaughts took heavy damage as well. Seven of them are barely capable of defending themselves against a destroyer-sized vessel, let alone anything more dangerous, and really should be pulled out of the line of battle entirely. They're good for nothing, but soaking up missiles."

"I think we can find a better use for them than that," Katy said, sharply. They were all too tired for a proper discussion and discipline, she suspected, would be way down. Crew morale, bad enough after taking such a beating, would only worsen under the influence of little

sleep and desperate repair efforts. “I assume they can all still flicker?”

“The flicker drives are mounted under heavy armour,” the tactical officer said. That didn’t prove anything, Katy knew; the power plants might have been damaged enough to render FTL travel impossible for sheer lack of power. It wasn’t too likely — that sort of damage would probably destroy the ship outright — but it had to be watched. “They’re all capable of flickering, although probably not at one hundred percent accuracy.”

“Such as it is,” Katy said, drawing up the reports and studying them on her terminal. She had to blink to force her eyes to focus. The computer systems on the superdreadnaughts would have calculated the damage automatically — although she knew from bitter experience that such systems were sharply limited — and it wasn’t good. There was no escaping the need for a shipyard. “All right. This is what we’re going to do.”

The assembled officers looked back at her. They didn’t look sharp, or aware, merely too tired to feel anything. Such tiredness could kill, Katy knew, and had done in space, but she couldn’t send them all to bed. Not yet. They’d just have to depend on stimulants, despite the dangers, for a few more hours before they could sleep. It was just another problem for her to solve.

“The seven damaged superdreadnaughts are to be dispatched back to Earth at once,” she ordered, finally. She’d made a mistake by not holding the *Zipper* long enough to send it along as an escort, although pirates would still hesitate to go near the superdreadnaughts. The mere thought was a humiliating reminder of how far 2nd Fleet had fallen. “They are to be escorted by the 45th and 46th Squadron, or at least their remaining ships. They will transport back to Earth as many of the seriously injured as we can pack onboard.”

She paused, noting the relief on some faces. “Before we send them back, however, we are going to pull everyone, but a skeleton crew off those ships,” she continued, ignoring the glances. “I want the engineers, the weapons tech, the medical corpsmen — everyone — off those ships and onto the remaining ships. We’re going to have to repair the other ships on the fly and we’re going to need them. We’re not out of the war yet.”

Her gaze swept the room. “Let’s not hide from the truth, shall we?” She snapped, gauging their response. She knew what they were thinking. They were the Shadow Fleet, the fleet that had toppled an empire! They didn’t get their asses kicked so firmly. It just didn’t happen to them! The younger crew hadn’t been with the fleet at First Morrison; they hadn’t picked up the attitude that came from knowing that you were frequently out-massed and outgunned. They’d seen the destroyed loyalist starships during the war — the *first* war, her mind

chattered — but they hadn't connected it with something that could happen to them. "We got our behinds firmly kicked, didn't we?"

She allowed her voice to harden. "We were lured into a trap" — it was clear in hindsight — "and we were hammered," she snapped. "It's not the end of the war. We took losses and defeats in the last war and we still won. We can win this war… and we will win this war. Defeat would mean that all of our struggles had been futile."

One hand thumped the table, hard. "We will proceed to Hawthorn and prepare there to meet the coming offensive," she said, her voice challenging them to dissent. She would have squashed any disagreement firmly. "Admiral Wilhelm will come for Hawthorn and we will hammer him before we break off and act as a pain in *his* rear. He won't be able to relax or concentrate on the drive on Earth while we're in his rear… and, by doing so, we will ensure that we will win the war."

Her voice lowered. "We are going to work as hard as we can, and perhaps a little harder, to get these ships back into fighting trim, but we are going to do it," she said, coldly. "We are going to bring these ships back to life and we will fight, standing between the Empire and the threat of a military rule. He expects us to break. He expects us to keep running until we're back out on the Rim. He expects us to surrender… and he's dead wrong.

"I expect that each and every one of you will put forward one hundred percent effort to repair these ships and prepare for the next round," she concluded. "We took a beating and morale is in the crapper, but we've not lost yet. If you slack, or you allow others to slack, you will find me the worst fucking nightmare in your life." Her voice hardened. "And you can bet on that, understand?"

* * *

It was two days before the damaged superdreadnaughts were ready for their return to Earth, but the time had not been wasted. The superdreadnaughts hadn't been entirely cannibalised, but the engineers had stripped out almost all of the spare parts and emergency supplies, along with most of the remaining missiles. The Battle of Cottbus hadn't lasted *that* long, not now she'd had a chance to calculate it properly, but it still surprised her. It felt as if they'd fought for *days* before they'd retreated.

"They're ready to flicker out," the communications officer informed her, when she took her place on the Flag Deck. The crew looked as exhausted as Katy felt, although she had ordered rigid sleep periods for the entire crew, but they didn't look beaten any more.

They had her to thank for that. Katy had been a ruthless, if understanding, taskmaster over the past two days and the fleet had some of its morale back. They were going to need it. “Captain Patel wishes you good luck and asks if you wouldn’t reconsider.”

Katy surprised herself by laughing. Captain Patel was an analyst in his spare time and she’d had him studying the sensor records of the battle, matching the IFF signals from the enemy ships to the Imperial Navy database. The picture he’d built up hadn’t been a comforting one. There had definitely been ships from at least four different Sector Fleets in the line of battle, too many to be a simple coincidence or merely a case of the records being out of times. Admiral Wilhelm wasn’t alone. He had allies.

“Tell him that he’s going to be needed at Earth,” Katy said firmly. Captain Patel wouldn’t have a comfortable flight. His superdreadnaughts were stuffed to bursting with wounded, while the medics had transferred all of the stasis tubes to his care. “Clear him to depart now, if you please…”

Nineteen icons vanished from the display. “They have flickered out,” the tactical officer remarked, calmly. The display stabilised, showing the remaining starships and the maintenance bugs buzzing around them. “Local space is clear.”

“Good,” Katy said. She would have been astonished if Admiral Wilhelm had managed to track them down, or even if they encountered a rogue starship. “Set course for Hawthorn. It’s time to get back into the battle zone.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kathy had given Jason Cordova permission to enter her small apartment at any time, the only person she'd given such permission to in her entire life. It didn't surprise her that, when she arrived home from her office and a short trip to the Jupiter Shipyards, Cordova was waiting for her. He'd done it before, sometimes sneaking up to surprise her and at other times just waiting for her, but this was different. He looked… tired and worn.

"Jason," she said, in honest surprise. She'd never seen him lose his composure completely. The brash pirate persona he'd pulled around him like a shield, a person who could be loving and tender one moment and boorish and crude the next, seemed to have faded away. He still wore his pirate outfit, as outrageous and clashing as ever, but for the first time since she'd met him, he wore it like a costume, not his natural clothes. He looked like a man wearing his father's uniform. "Jason, are you all right?"

He looked up at her. His beard slipped slightly, revealing bloodshot eyes. She'd known that the bushy beard was a fake, of course, but she'd never seen it come off without his permission. Underneath, his chin was as smooth and hairless as his own, the result of a tiny change in his genetic code. She'd read somewhere that men who had such changes choose to wear false beards later in life, for reasons lost somewhere in the innermost recesses of the male psyche, but Cordova had never struck her as the kind of person to care about such matters. He'd worn his beard because absolutely no one would recognise him without it. He had walked through the High City wearing the grey tasteless garb of a Family accountant and no one had batted an eyelid.

"No," he said, finally. He sounded as if he had been crying, although there was no evidence on his face to suggest tears. She could barely process what she was seeing. Jason Cordova had taken on a battlecruiser squadron with a light cruiser and escaped unscathed, laughing and joking all the way, but now he looked almost scared. Something maternal, buried deep inside her, awoke and she reached out to enfold him in her arms. He felt like a man whose heart was racing madly, almost as if he were *scared*. She doubted that their bedroom gymnastics had had that much effect against him. Holding him was like holding a mouse or a hamster. "Kathy, I…"

He broke off with an effort. "Kathy, the world turned upside down."

Kathy stared at him, unable to understand. If something had happened, she would have been informed at once, as part of the

innermost section of the Provisional Government. It was still too early to hear anything from Cottbus, or from Admiral Garland; the last courier boat had informed them that she intended to proceed to Cottbus and carry out her orders. There had been no great disaster, no fleet engagement in Earth's orbit, so why was Cordova so… wound up?

"Here," she said, standing up and pulling him into the living room. She didn't drink often herself — and she'd been amused to discover that Cordova had decidedly plebeian tastes — but she did have a bottle of fine brandy her father had given to her, back when he'd been trying to worm his way back into her good graces. She poured a healthy portion into a crystal cup and passed it to him, watching with some alarm as he swigged it down like cheap rotgut. She'd only tasted the asteroid-produced booze once, but she'd had the impression that it had taken the lining off her teeth. "Now, what's happened…?"

"I'm not the person you thought I was," Cordova said. He took the bottle from her and poured himself a second glass, tossing it down in bare seconds. Kathy frowned and removed the bottle from his sight, silently calculating how much he had drunk. It was possible that he'd drunk much more before she'd arrived home, either from her stash or from a local bar, and his implants weren't kicking in. "Kathy, everything has changed, again."

Kathy blinked at him, puzzled. It wasn't uncommon for con artists to try to pass themselves off as members of the Thousand Families and quite often they succeeded until they were compared against the Imperial Register. There were over two million men and women, after all, who could be counted as part of the Families and no one knew them all. As long as they remained carefully out of the way, instead of posing as someone from the senior Families, they could get away with it for years…

But she knew that Cordova was real.

"They want me to kill him," he said, thinly. His voice broke again. "They want me to kill Colin!"

"But…" Kathy started. She broke off and thought rapidly. She'd learned to think quickly during her first year at the asteroid mining platform, before she'd met Cordova for the first time, and it was a skill that had come in handy from time to time. She'd learned other skills as well, such as the basic practicality of always having a get-out plan, and she found herself checking out her plan to escape from Earth. There were first-rank worlds or isolated colonies that would be glad to see her. "Jason, who wants you to kill Colin, and why?"

"Tiberius," Cordova said. Kathy recoiled. He couldn't have surprised her more if he'd pulled her over his knees and spanked her.

She'd liked Tiberius, the Family Head who'd joined the rebel cause, understanding that the Families had to adapt and change to fit their new circumstances. He hadn't even tried to get her into bed, unlike some of the other young men of the Families, but clearly he'd been playing a deeper game. "He wants me to kill Colin, somehow…"

Something clicked behind Kathy's eyes. It was almost impossible to imagine anything that could be used to pressure someone like Cordova into agreeing to commit murder, or something that someone as smart as Tiberius could imagine being useable to force him to kill a friend and ally, but clearly Tiberius could think of something. Only one possibility made sense.

"You're a Cicero, aren't you?" She said, reaching out and holding him. The more she thought about it, the more she knew she was right. The only people who might have a claim on Cordova's loyalties, apart from the rebels, the Provisional Government and Kathy herself, were his Family. His mysterious unnamed Family. A Cicero! It made perfect sense. The Cicero Family would have had the clout to ensure that Cordova's past was carefully hidden… and, unlike so many of the other families, they had adapted well to the brave new galaxy.

Not as well as we thought, she thought angrily. Her surprise was rapidly being replaced by rage. The Provisional Government wouldn't survive Colin's death. It would dissolve rapidly into a mass of competing factions, allowing Tiberius and the remainder of the Families to quietly reassert control behind the scenes. It wouldn't be long before the new order fell apart, to be replaced by a version of the old order, run by someone smart enough to prevent a second rebellion for years…

Or perhaps it would be worse. Colin had broken centuries of unthinking supremacy and submission to Earth. The first-rank worlds would fight to keep their independence; after Gaul, they would have no choice… and they were arming to the teeth. Colony worlds, established and then systematically raped by the Thousand Families to feed their bloated appetites, would fight against any restoration of the debt-peonage that had held them in bondage. Warlords like Admiral Wilhelm — *and even the remains of the Shadow Fleet*, she thought darkly — would launch their own bids for supremacy. The Empire would fall apart into a nightmare of civil war.

The vision held her transfixed, for she had feared something like it once she started to understand — truly understand — the underlying power and structure of the Empire. The Shadow Fleet had fought a fairly clean war, without scorching a single world, but that would change. The Empire might have threatened to scorch Gaul, and they'd certainly come too close to succeeding, but if it all fell apart hundreds of worlds would be scorched, or even just targeted with a

handful of shipkillers or antimatter bombs. The devastation would blow humanity back to a handful of worlds, burning in the night, leaving the remains of humanity back in the Stone Age. It would be the end of civilisation.

"Yes," Cordova said, finally. "I was born Jason Cicero, forty years ago on Earth, and banished from the Family fifteen years ago, wiped out of all the records." His voice darkened slightly, dipping towards depression. "I looked myself up in the Imperial Register after we took Earth. They wiped me completely from the records. My mother probably told everyone, right up to the day she died, that she only had three sons."

Kathy blinked. "And you've never tried to talk to your brothers?"

Cordova shrugged. "What would we have to say to one another?"

Kathy nodded, thinking hard. "When does he want you to kill Colin?"

"He didn't say," Cordova explained. His voice tightened, but focusing on the question seemed to be helping him concentrate. She'd never seen him so weak and vulnerable before and it bothered her… and it bothered her that it bothered her. Had she really been looking for a man who would be a font of strength, rather that someone who was intelligent and smart enough to be good company? "He just wants me to be ready to move when the order came."

"I see," Kathy said. She didn't know much about the security surrounding Colin, but she knew that it was extensive, based around the well-founded belief that he had far too many enemies. The Government section of the High City was wired completely by Imperial Intelligence, with armed and armoured Marines on call… and she'd been assured that it would take a major assault by armed soldiers to break through the defences. The Household Troopers had been disbanded, hadn't they? The Third Emperor, whose name escaped her, had used them to make himself Emperor, but Colin had ordered all of the Household Troops disbanded. Even if Tiberius had kept some of them back, without triggering off alarms, they would still have to break through the Marines. "Jason, I need to ask you a question."

He looked up at her, already knowing what she was going to ask. "Jason, what does he have on you?" Kathy asked. The mere detail of Jason Cordova being a Cicero wouldn't have *that* much effect — hell, she could see it working out in their favour. Her father had made considerable political capital because there was a Tyler at the heart of the Provisional Government, despite Kathy's refusal to use her position to help expand the Family fortunes, and there was no reason why Cicero couldn't do the same. "Why does he even think that you'll do as he says?"

"It's a long story," Cordova said. He turned, facing away from her. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You have to tell me," Kathy said, softly. It had to be something bad, really bad, but what? The Families had been known to forgive mass slaughter and child molesting, or even worse crimes. The memory of one of her few friends, brain-wiped and altered by her own father, rose up unbidden from her mind. If her father hadn't fled Earth after the Shadow Fleet had arrived, Kathy would have had him killed for that crime. He had effectively murdered his own daughter. She couldn't imagine anything that would have had such an effect on Cordova… but Tiberius evidently could. "What does he have on you, Jason?"

He turned to face her, looking around for the bottle she'd placed out of sight. "It's a long story," he repeated. "I grew up here — well, not *here*; the Cicero Estate — as a third-tier son. I didn't have any real hope of becoming the Cicero, so they decided that I could serve the Family — and therefore the Empire — by going into the Imperial Navy."

Kathy smiled. She'd wondered if Jason Cicero had actually been one of Tiberius's dead brothers, but apparently not. A third-tier Family Member was somewhere in-between, trusted to handle matters that couldn't be left to outsiders, rewarded and feted to the best of the Family's considerable ability, but not often offered real power. Their birth made them part of the Family, but not important parts of the Family. Several thousand such young aristocrats had joined the Provisional Government after the end of the war, seeing it as a chance to carve out wealth and power for themselves without having to kowtow to first-tier members who'd gained their positions through an accident of birth.

"I discovered I was good at it," Cordova continued. His voice grew more confident as he remembered. "I might have gotten into the Academy because of who my Family were, but I tried to make them proud and I was good at it, really I was. I graduated third in my class and there was no influence used to give me that position. They knew I was that good."

Kathy nodded. The Imperial Navy's series of academies for senior officers were political to a terrifying degree, often graduating complete incompetents because of who they were, or whom they were related to. Colin hadn't graduated well, she recalled, even though going by scores alone he should have been in the top ten. Others, such as Admiral Percival, had been told repeatedly that their Family Names meant more to the Academy than skill or competence. The smarter ones tended to find clients to help them carry out the duties they were so ill-prepared to carry out. The hatreds that ran through the Academy

were legends…

"I earned my position," Cordova said. "I didn't know that they were not going to allow me anywhere near a superdreadnaught squadron, but even when I realised that I would never be allowed to rise above Captain, I didn't care. I became a Midshipman, and then a Lieutenant and then a Commander… and finally they made me Captain of a light cruiser. I met Admiral Percival along the way and I think I embarrassed him a bit."

Kathy snorted. Admiral Percival had been beyond embarrassment. His incompetence had been the subject of private whispers and jokes among the Imperial Navy before Colin had rebelled, taken a superdreadnaught squadron from one of his clients, and then killed him at Harmony. Now, he was used as a textbook case of what not to do at the new Imperial Academy. It was, she'd decided long ago, better than he deserved.

"And for a few years I was happy," Cordova continued. He sounded happier too. "We patrolled the Rim, we chased down and killed pirates and we watched as the Empire continued to expand. I spent years hunting down Captain Morgan and his infamous Morgan's Hold, but it was my victory in the end… and I loved it. There was no chance of promotion, but I didn't care! I had a good ship and a good crew — and we punched out a heavy cruiser once in an exercise, which probably took about ten years off everyone's life — and we were happy."

Kathy saw, behind his torn face, a image of the Captain he had once been and smiled. The Empire wouldn't want to risk putting someone so competent in a senior position — the last person they'd trusted in a sensitive position had been Janice Windsor, who had made herself Empress with the support and backing of Home Fleet — but Cordova hadn't shared Colin's burning ambition and resentment. He'd been happy with the cards he'd been dealt… so what had gone so wrong?

He looked up at her. "And then I got priority orders," he said. "I was to take the *John Rayland* to this world, right on the edge of the Rim. The orders didn't allow me any leeway. I was to investigate the world, prove or disprove a report that had been filed with Imperial Intelligence… and if the world was what the report claimed it was, I was to scorch it without further ado. They gave me the mission, I think, because of who I was. They trusted me to carry it out without question.

"We should have known, we should have prepared for it," he said, breaking off. "They were spacefarers after all. Macore's fleet went further, so why couldn't they?

"And we found the world. It only took one look to know what we

were dealing with, a harmless world, but one under a sentence of death. I refused. They were completely harmless. No space flight, barely anything beyond water-powered junk, no threat at all. I could have blown them to dust and ash and they wouldn't have a hope of hitting back. I said that it was pointless. We never even figured out how to talk to them. We might have more success without the pressure of the war."

"But…"

He ignored her. "I didn't realise at the time," he explained. "I didn't understand the pressures involved. I told them no and that was a mistake. They ordered me to scorch the world and sent a squadron of battlecruisers along to enforce their decision. A completely harmless world, far less dangerous than Gaul, burned to ash."

Kathy stared at him. "But why?" She asked. It made no sense to her. Why would the Empire destroy a possibly-valuable assert. A developed colony world was almost priceless, with or without the original inhabitants. "Why did they want to wipe out such a harmless world?"

"Don't you understand?" Cordova asked, almost pleading. "They weren't rebels, or traitors, or missing colonists. They weren't even *human*. They were *Dathi*! They were *Dathi* and I wanted to spare their lives!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dathi!

Kathy felt herself recoil at the mere mention of the name. *Dathi*! The second alien race humanity had met and the first external enemy. The alien race that had introduced itself to the human race by trying to exterminate it. The implacable and unreasonable foe that had destroyed planets and habitats alike, ruthlessly unconcerned about casualties or even practicalities. The very picture of the hopelessly alien force, beyond all communication… and reason. The Dathi, humanity's greatest enemy and humanity's greatest victory, wiped out over a thousand years ago.

Or so everyone had thought.

She heard herself stammering even as she spoke. "They were destroyed," she protested, numbly. She had braced herself for terrifying revelations involving rape, or child abuse, or something else that might have fitted the case, not this. No one could have even conceived of such a thing. "They're all dead."

"By now, I'm sure that they are," Cordova said. He sounded oddly amused, and yet relieved, by her response. "They'll have sent out someone with Admiral Percival's level of intelligence and willingness to contemplate genocide. The world will have been scorched and then bombarded with asteroids and then declared off-limits, just to hide what happened there. They needn't have bothered. Hardly anyone would have gone there in any case."

Kathy stared at him. It all made a terrifying kind of sense. The Dathi were the nightmares that lurked in humanity's past, the very backbone of the Empire's campaign of fear against other alien races… and their sole claim to power. The histories she'd learned from her father and others from the Thousand Families, as opposed to the cut and dried histories spoon-fed to the commoners, showed that the Dathi had been the catalyst behind the Empire. The Federation and the Outsiders, united against the greater threat, had merged to become the Empire… and the Thousand Families, the massive corporations that had pushed humanity into space, had taken the helm. The Dathi were, quite literally, the Empire's reason for being…

And one of their own had tried to spare Dathi lives.

The very concept shocked her, even though cold logic told her that Cordova had been right. A pastoral world, without any technology capable of reaching space, could be no threat to the Empire. Even if they had had spaceflight, they wouldn't have had the sheer power required to shake the Empire, although Colin had proven that they wouldn't have needed *that* much power… or perhaps they

would. Colin had had popular appeal, speaking to those who had been pushed aside and trodden on by the Empire and the Dathi wouldn't have had that. They were, very much, an equal-opportunity threat.

She'd prided herself on being capable of thinking even in a crisis and forced herself to think, coldly and logically. Tiberius had been right. The more she thought about it, the more she realised that he had been absolutely correct. If the news about Cordova and the Dathi got out into the Empire, the Provisional Government would be badly shaken. If there was one thing that united the human race, it was suspicion of aliens, even harmless creatures like the Rock-Monsters. They wouldn't accept Cordova if they knew that he had spared a planet of Dathi, regardless of any abstract morality; they'd been brought up to believe that the Dathi were monsters and a permanent threat to humanity. She'd *known*, a day ago, that the threat had been largely manufactured by the Thousand Families — after all, the Dathi were dead, so *they* couldn't complain — but now, now the threat might have been real after all. The Dathi could have a far more advanced world somewhere out past the Rim.

But it was a sword that cut both ways. There was no escaping the fact that Jason Cordova was actually Jason Cicero. Even if the precise Family remained a mystery, everyone knew that he had once been one of the Thousand Families. If the Empire learned that someone from the Families had spared Dathi lives, the Thousand Families would be badly shaken as well, even though they had been weakened by the rebellion. They might even lose what little grounds they had left to rule. The balance between the remainder of the Family-owned businesses and their workers wasn't a stable one… and this could push it over the edge. The entire Empire might come apart at the seams.

Cordova stood up and started to pace, talking all the while. Kathy listened with half an ear, trying to decide what to do. Tiberius had used it mercilessly, knowing that it would always remain a loaded gun pointed at whoever ruled the Empire… which probably meant that he intended to dispose of Cordova once he had outlived his usefulness. There were other reasons as well, she decided; only a fool would take someone who had survived and prospered along the Rim for granted. Cordova might decide to take him down, just to prevent the secret from getting out, for she was morbidly certain that it wasn't something known to the vast majority of the Cicero Clan. The more people who knew something, she knew, the harder it was to keep it a secret. Tiberius wouldn't have shared it with just anyone, not unless he decided to use it.

"He could be bluffing, I suppose," she said, unwillingly. She had enough experience of Family-level politics to feel certain that she was missing something. Tiberius's blackmail information would do massive

damage to his Clan if he wasn't careful — *talk about shooting himself in the foot*, she thought wryly — and his enemies would certainly jump on him. Perhaps the entire Clan was rotten, they would say; if Roosevelt could go under, why not Cicero?

"He's not bluffing," Cordova said. Kathy silently cursed herself. She had forgotten, in her burst of oddly maternal feeling, that Cordova had a first-class brain. "I believe that if he told everyone, the remainder of the Thousand Families couldn't jump on him without tipping off a general collapse. The Provisional Government might be different, but how could they hold Tiberius responsible for something *I* did?"

Kathy nodded slowly. "And they couldn't charge you with genocide," she added, thoughtfully. "You didn't commit genocide."

"They're going to have to charge me with dereliction of duty, at the very least," Cordova said. His voice weakened again. "Every Imperial Navy officer, at the Academy, is taught about the Dathi War and how close the human race came to being exterminated, leaving only a handful of humans fleeing the Federation in old ships. I believe that that was one of the reasons why the Macore Colony Fleet fled so far from Earth. They cannot afford to let me have a clear escape from the past, not with the entire Empire at stake."

Kathy winced. He was right. If the news leaked out, the public outcry would become unmanageable. They already had enough problems with Admiral Wilhelm and the other warlords out along the Rim. If the news leaked out — and became exaggerated, as such rumours and stories often were — the Provisional Government would find itself under siege. The human race had become used to keeping aliens down, just so that they could have someone to look down upon to distract them from the miseries of their daily lives, and the very thought of a Dathi-lover in the heart of the Provisional Government would shock them. Colin could get away with a great deal, she knew, but she doubted he could get away with keeping Cordova in his government.

And his position would be very weak. He'd commanded the Volunteer Fleet and was respected along the Rim, but that would vanish in an instant when they learned he'd spared Dathi, not the reputed human colony world. The Rim's inhabitants would become his most determined enemies, hunting the *Random Numbers* from asteroid to asteroid, until he was finally brought to battle. Every man's hand would be turned against him. It dawned on her that the wisest thing to do would be to abandon him, now, but somehow she couldn't do that. In a universe she'd grown to loathe a long time before she'd been sent out to the Rim, he was one of the few truly decent men and women she'd met. She hadn't allowed herself to admit that she loved

him, but she cared about him and she would not let him go.

She reached out and pulled him into a hug. “Don’t worry,” she said, as she kissed his cheek. It always felt different when he wasn’t wearing his beard. “We’ll find some way out of this, I promise.”

Cordova snorted. “We could change our names and run for the Rim,” he said, dryly. “I could come up with some faked papers that would give us some real options.”

Kathy shook her head. The Empire had been established for over a thousand years. One of the reasons why there had been no general rebellion before Colin had been that it had security measures everywhere, measures that largely remained in place. Parliament — or whoever won the power struggle on Earth — would be able to send out warrants for their arrest, coded with their DNA codes. They could have changed their appearances, even their genders, but they couldn’t change their DNA patterns… and if they went anywhere near a civilised world, they would be caught and arrested. The first-rank worlds wouldn’t hide them, not if they’d been involved in sparing Dathi lives… it was sickening, and it was part of the universe the Empire had built.

“That’s not an option,” she said, firmly. She grinned up at him and was dismayed to see the depression written on his face. “We have to beat Tiberius at his own game.”

“He wants me to prepare to kill Colin,” Cordova said, sharply. “If Colin is removed from the game, now, the Provisional Government will fall apart. No one else has the prestige to hold the government together. Tiberius and you are from the Families. The others are all from the first-rank worlds, or Macore, or even from the Freebooters. I doubt that even Joshua could hold the Empire together… and he doesn’t want the job.”

Kathy felt her eyes narrow. “And how do you know that?”

“He’s the only person who fought on the other side to emerge a hero from the war,” Cordova said. “He could have led the Morrison Sector Fleet against Home Fleet and kicked its butt from here to the Rim, making himself Emperor in the process, before offering Colin a deal for the future. No, he doesn’t want to be Emperor…”

“But it was Tiberius who nominated him for the role of Sector Fleet Commander,” Kathy said, thoughtfully. She’d gone through the records carefully, although many of the real decision-making meetings had been kept off the records. Tiberius had nominated Joshua to take the command and, in doing so, had risked his own power base. “He wouldn’t have done that unless…”

Something clicked in her mind. “Joshua is part of his conspiracy,” she said, grimly. She’d underestimated the scale of the problem. Tiberius wouldn’t be acting alone, if only to ensure that the blame

would be spread thinly. He had to have allies… and Joshua made the most sense as a possible ally. Even if he didn't want to be Emperor — and she had to admit that it would be a bit of a poisoned chalice while the Empire was on the verge of breaking apart — he would be the best person to take the throne, advised, of course, by Tiberius. "We can't trust him either."

"So, who does that leave?" Cordova asked, grimly. "Who can we trust?"

"The only person who stands to lose everything if they succeed," Kathy said, firmly. "We have to take this to Colin himself."

Cordova winced. "You want to tell him everything?" He asked, slowly. "What happens if he decides that I did the wrong thing?"

Kathy smiled wanly. "How can he decide that when he's trying to give the aliens their freedom?" She asked. "He can't just turn on you without weakening his own position… and, with Tiberius and the others burrowing away underneath him, he cannot afford to weaken himself any further."

"The Dathi aren't common aliens," Cordova protested. "They were a very definite threat to all of humanity."

"I know," Kathy said. She looked over at him, fascinated despite herself. "Did you actually manage to talk to them?"

Cordova shook his head. The Dathi were unique in at least one respect; no one, in over a hundred years of war, had managed to establish communications between them and humanity. Their language was seemingly beyond the efforts of the most advanced translation software, mind-probes couldn't reach into their brains and even the handful of prisoners the human race had taken had showed no interest in talking to their captors. They were the very picture of the soulless alien threat, dedicated to destroying the human race… and they had been laughably easy to demonise. Why not? They *had* done most of the vile things they were claimed to have done. The Empire's propaganda and recruitment advertisements still used the Dathi as a recruiting tool.

"I always thought that we might manage to talk to them one day," he said. There was an odd note of regret in his voice, when the warrior and starship captain gave way to the scholar. "We were trying to talk to them under the pressures of a war. It simply wasn't possible to establish communications then, but I wondered if it could be done without the war, without any threats…"

Kathy nodded, sadly. She believed him, but he had been dangerously naive then. No one, not even a Family Member, could get away with hearsay on such a scale. The Empire's internal politics demanded that the Dathi world be scorched and then firmly suppressed, just to avoid casting doubt on the success of the original

genocide that had ended the war. After all, if one Dathi world had survived, why not others? Where was the guarantee that there were no other Dathi out there, waiting to spring on the human race? There was none. Humanity had spread far under the Empire… but space was effectively limitless. The Dathi might have travelled as far as the Clouds, or even the next galaxy…

Her lips twitched. It was impossible to prove that the race had been wiped out, so they remained a horrendously effective propaganda tool… and one that would never become overplayed, not until the entire galaxy had been brought under human control. They made such a perfect threat, all the better for being founded in reality… and one that no one could seriously oppose. How could they when the consequences could be so devastating? The rebellion, for all of its pent-up fury and violence, hadn't been able to hold a candle to the Dathi War.

"Leave that for the moment," she ordered, firmly. Her brain was racing into overdrive as she tried to think of different possibilities. They had little choice, but to go to Colin, but would that expose them to Tiberius? If he thought that they were plotting against him, and they were, he would have little choice, but to react as quickly and as violently as possible. How far could he go without betraying himself to Colin? He might have controlled his Family's estate completely — she made a mental note to avoid any parties or entertainments offered there — but he certainly didn't control the High City… or did he? The city might have been under the control of Colin's security forces, but how complete was their control, really? The Families and Clans had fought their proxy wars in the city. They knew it perfectly.

Cordova shrugged. "You're right," he said, with a flicker of his old personality shining though. She hadn't realised how much she'd missed it until it showed itself again. "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. Let's go to Colin now and tell him what we know. If we can't trust anyone, but him…"

"Not yet," Kathy said, thinking hard. "Are you sure that he didn't give you any date for the assassination?"

"Yes," Cordova said, dryly. "I may be mad, bad and dangerous to know, but my memory is not *that* bad."

"This isn't the time for jokes," Kathy said, although she was privately relieved to hear him cracking jokes again. "I don't know much about assassinations, but if they don't have a date in mind, they can't expect you to set any traps for him, not where the Marines might find them. That would be rather revealing."

"I know," Cordova said, serious again. "I thought about it and I couldn't think of a way of doing it, short of walking up to him and punching out his throat. Any weapon would be detected and removed

a long time before I could get into his presence. They even make me hand over my cutlass and pistol before I enter the room."

"Wise of them," Kathy said, dryly. She had a private worry that one day he would hurt himself on his specially-made cutlass, although he'd told her, with a perfectly straight face, that he'd used it in boarding actions. She didn't believe a word of it. "How do they expect you to succeed, then, if you can't get a weapon into his presence?"

"I don't know," Cordova said, shaking his head. "The only method I was able to think of involved luring Colin onto my own ground, the *Random Numbers*, and assassinating him then."

Kathy saw it clearly. If Cordova, one of Colin's closest allies, had killed him… and had done so on his own ship, the Provisional Government would come apart… and the Thousand Families would step back into the breech, perhaps with Joshua as Emperor. It would also solve the problem of Tiberius's own position being weakened…

She broke off as her communicator chimed. "Excuse me," she said, and picked it up. "Yes?"

"Lady Kathy, the Cabinet has been called into emergency succession," the voice on the other end said, grimly. "There have been… developments at Cottbus."

"I'm on my way," Kathy said. She looked over at Cordova. "I think its bad news."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Carola looked at the pair of armed Marines escorting her and smiled.

She'd expected them ever since the destroyer had flickered into the Solar System, transmitted a brief encrypted message towards the *Victorious* — and her, of course — and flickered out again before any starship at Earth could intercept her. The message hadn't been unexpected, of course, merely a report that the Imperial Navy — or whatever the Provisional Government ended up renaming the former Imperial Navy — had engaged Cottbus's forces… and had been defeated. The alternative, that Admiral Wilhelm had been defeated, had worried her, but the gamble had paid off. Cottbus could now take the initiative and advance on Earth.

The Marines had arrived four hours later, which meant that someone had to have returned from Cottbus to report on the battle to Colin and his allies. Carola was actually quite interested to know what had actually happened — the report hadn't included any data on losses to either side, although it had implied that the losses had been decisive for the Imperial Navy — but the Marines weren't talking. They had merely walked into her Embassy and invited her to come with them. She hadn't bothered to pretend that she had a choice in the matter, although she had been careful to film her departure between the two armour-clad men. If everything worked out as she hoped, it would serve as great propaganda.

Interesting, she thought, as the Marines led her into the Parliament Building. Hundreds of men and women were running around, some of them in a state of panic, much to her private amusement. Cottbus was over a thousand light years away, after all, although she had to admit that Wilhelm could have come directly to Earth in the wake of his victory. She doubted, however, that his forces had escaped unscathed, even with the help of the Nerds. Her husband would have to spend some time regrouping before he could advance.

Perhaps we should have just set out to attack Earth first, she thought, although she knew that that would have been a mistake. They might have managed to break through Earth's defences — Colin had proven, after all, that they weren't unbeatable — but they would have still had to reckon with the other rebel formations in the Core Worlds, to say nothing of the first-rank worlds. Luring a force out to Cottbus, where it could be broken, had been the only remaining possibility… and it had worked. The Parliament Building wouldn't be in such a panic unless the losses had been serious, which meant that there was very little between her husband and Earth.

Her eyes flickered over the interior of the building as she was escorted into a section she didn't recognise, although she had studied the building's plans carefully. It looked more faded than the remainder of the building, as if it hadn't been used for centuries, which was actually quite possible. Parliament hadn't had a serious role for centuries. No one had been interested, until recently, in actually redecorating the building and it was a tribute to how well the original building had been constructed, back when Parliament might have had a serious role, that it had lasted so long. She already knew who she was going to see and, as the Marines ran her through a series of security checks and gently, but firmly, removed her terminal, she prepared herself.

The door opened, allowing her access to Colin's office. He was standing in front of a holographic starchart, studying the blinking icons thoughtfully, before blanking it and turning to face her. She took the opportunity to look around his office, noting that it was barren, almost empty, apart from a comfortable chair. It took her a moment to realise that it had probably been pulled out of a starship's bridge and wondered if it had come from the *Lightning*, the first starship Colin had captured and used against the Empire. There was no way to know, short of asking Colin, and she wouldn't lower herself to ask.

"I imagine that you know why you're here," Colin said. His voice was curiously flat, something she decided probably concealed anger, or fear. His entire plan to reform and rebuild the Empire had just taken a serious beating. He had to be furious about the disaster, and yet there was little sign of it on his face. "What are you and your husband thinking?"

Uncharted waters, Carola thought, gleefully. Colin had been capable — hell, he'd been more than capable — when it came to fighting the Empire, when everything had been black and white. Now, facing a multi-sided war and knowing that the wrong action could cause more damage in the long run, he had far more difficulty in taking action. It wasn't an unprecedented situation — human history had been full of them — but it was the first Colin had faced in his entire experience. She doubted that there was anyone alive with the kind of experience Colin needed.

"That we saw our own chance at power and took it," she said. It felt so *good* to say it, after spending weeks buttering up the egos of power-seekers on Earth, while trying to mislead Parliament into accepting the Cottbus Sector as an independent state. She hadn't been brought up to be bluntly honest, in a universe where speaking truth to power could have disastrous consequences, but when she was Empress of the Empire, she would change that. How could anyone survive and prosper when no one dared to tell them when they were making a

mistake? “How are we any different from you?”

Colin looked at her, his expression unreadable. “You’re in this for power,” he said, slowly. “I wanted to reshape the Empire itself.”

“The same as us,” Carola said, calmly. “Dare I assume that you have a message you want me to pass on to Markus?”

“There will be no message,” Colin said, flatly. He looked down at her thoughtfully. “I studied the records of the battle carefully. Your husband lured my people into a trap, just as he did with the cruisers, and opened fire. There will be no peace.”

“I didn’t expect that there would be peace,” Carola said, keeping her voice calm. In one respect, it was little different from facing the social kings and queens of the Empire, although she was partly aware that the consequences would be less devastating. Colin, at least, had a sense of honour. He wouldn’t blast someone, or crush him or her socially, just for disagreeing with him. “I shall convoy that message to Markus…”

She stood up. “Sit down,” Colin said, sharply. Carola obeyed, surprised. “Who are your allies?”

Carola lifted an eyebrow. “Allies, sir?”

“I studied the records of the battle carefully,” Colin repeated, almost as if he was forming a case in front of a judge. “Your ships weren’t just brought up to their design specs, but equipped with technologies they shouldn’t have had. Where did they come from?”

Carola shrugged, as if it wasn’t important. “Cottbus was governed by a Clan that wanted to overthrow and replace Cicero as the premier shipbuilding Clan in the Empire,” she said. “They created an entire pool of talent that they intended to use to create new starships. Duplicating the arsenal ships was simple enough; duplicating everything else you showed the Empire took longer, but it was far from impossible.”

She leaned forward. “I should point out that, under the Moscow Accords, you have to return me to Cottbus,” she added. “You can’t keep me as a prisoner.”

Colin snorted. “Did you know that the *Victorious* attempted to launch missiles down towards the planet?” He asked. “The point defence caught them all, but if they had missed… shipkillers against a planetary surface is two-thirds of a scorching. The *Victorious* is nothing more than vapour now…and, as for you.”

He stood up in one smooth motion. “I rather feel that the *Victorious’s* attempt to decapitate the Provisional Government and, just incidentally, kill you as well puts us beyond the provisions of the Accords. You will be held as a prisoner until the war comes to an end, one way or the other.”

Carola stared at him. “The *Victorious* had no orders to bombard

the surface of the planet," she protested. "It only had orders to withdraw…"

"Perhaps your husband doesn't want to share his power, or perhaps someone on the ship decided that it was their only chance to hurt the Empire badly enough to make organising resistance tricky," Colin said. The door opened and a pair of armoured Marines entered. Carola couldn't tell if they were the same Marines as the ones who had escorted her to Colin's office. "Take her to the detention centre and hold her there."

"Yes, sir," the lead Marine said.

Carola, with icy dignity, stalked out and allowed them to lead her back out of the building, thinking hard. What had really happened in Earth orbit… and why?

* * *

"I have had the recordings from the battle carefully analysed," Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter said, as soon as Colin had called the meeting to order. There might be a time and a place for exchanging meaningless pleasantries, he had decided years ago, but it wasn't when the Empire was fighting for its life. "There is little doubt, but the Cottbus forces consist of units from four different sectors and include advanced technology that we developed ourselves."

There was a brief burst of whirring from Salgak's implants. "It is not impossible that Carola Wilhelm's clams may be accurate," the Geek said, as his laser communicator linked into the holographic display and illuminated aspects of the battle. Colin had half-expected the Geek to dispute Joshua's claim to having invented any technology — he'd been on the other side of the war at the time — but Salgak clearly had a different idea. "The technology they deployed is not actually anything new. It was deployed by us at Second Morrison, Gaul and Earth itself. They had six months to duplicate it and put it into production."

Joshua nodded. "The only real question is how much of the new weapons they actually have," he said. "Do we have any data on that issue?"

Kathy shot him an odd glance. "I have been attempting to modify standard Imperial production nodes to produce the new weapons," she said, flatly. "Once we took over the massive production facilities at Jupiter, Mars and AlphaCent, we were able to streamline them into producing the newer weapons, but production levels remain low, with hundreds of tiny bottlenecks. Indeed, much of our current weapons mix still comes from the facilities established along the Rim, with

obvious problems for future deployments."

Colin scowled. The Empire had had surprisingly large problems with logistics, despite having most of the shipping in the galaxy under its direct or indirect control, and had solved the problem by outsourcing weapons production to the individual sectors. Harmony, Morrison and Yanasaxon, to name, but three, had provided far more missiles than their respective sector fleets had actually required… and the late unlamented Admiral D'Ammassa had turned a profit by selling them to various dubious enterprises. If the Shadow Fleet had used conventional missiles — and it had, until recently — they wouldn't have any problems arming themselves, but if they used the newer missiles, their logistics took a beating.

"That's not the problem at the moment," he said, calmly. It was something that they would have to approach with care. "Admiral Garland has informed us of her intention to defend her base at Hawthorn and then attempt to engage Admiral Wilhelm's logistics and hamper his advance on Earth. Our problem is simpler. Can we stop them short of Earth itself?"

Tiberius spoke up from his corner of the table. "And should Admiral Garland remain in command?" He added. "She lost two-thirds of a fleet that is effectively irreplaceable before the matter is decided, one way or the other."

"We do have a new squadron of *General*-class superdreadnaughts working up now from AlphaCent," Kathy said, something unreadable in her tone. Colin frowned. She had never gotten on with Tiberius that well, but it was almost as if she was attempting to conceal her own feelings. "Added to Home Fleet, we would still be able to give them a fight if they came to Earth, right?"

"It's not that simple," Wachter said, flatly. "A superdreadnaught in Home Fleet is one that is not going to be at Cottbus, Hawthorn or anywhere else. If we stand in defence of Earth, Admiral Wilhelm could tear hell out of the other systems, including all of the first-rank worlds. A long campaign works in our favour, but the war could go on indefinitely and the damage would be vast, beyond comprehension."

"And unthinkable," Goscinny said, slowly. "He has enough superdreadnaughts to blow through any of the first-rank worlds, despite all of their arming-up programs after the Fall of Earth. They have to be defended."

"They can't be defended," Wachter said. "Like I said. A superdreadnaught squadron defending Gaul — which is on the other side of Earth, as you well know — will not be defending Earth, or indeed AlphaCent. We have to accept that Admiral Wilhelm may launch attacks on those systems."

"You just want to give them up?" Goscinny demanded, outraged.

“What choice do you expect them to make if Admiral Wilhelm’s starships enter the system and demand surrender? We can’t even mass the entire first-rank fleet again!”

“We’re getting off the issue at hand,” Tiberius said, calmly. He gazed around the room, almost as if he were counting allies and opponents. “Admiral Garland should be removed for this failure.”

“She had little choice in the matter,” Goscinny replied, angrily. “We decided how she should act, how she should fly to Cottbus and even how she should make her approach. Perhaps we should have ordered her to sneak up to the planet and bombard it from cloak, or maybe just demanding surrender? It wasn’t her fault.”

“And how would you know that?” Tiberius asked, smoothly. “You’re not a military expert.”

“Neither are you,” Goscinny responded, sharply. “You’re sitting here second-guessing someone who risked her life to defend the new order you allied yourself to, once the war was comfortably won! What cause do you have, you… *aristocrat*, for attacking her?”

“It is the duty of this council to remove any commanding officer who cannot handle the task we assign her,” Tiberius said, flatly. “I have to question…”

“Enough,” Wachter said, flatly. He fixed Tiberius with a look he’d learned in his years of commanding starships and then entire fleets. Colin wouldn’t have chosen to defy Admiral Percival if Percival had had half of Joshua’s undoubted skill. The entire rebellion would have been impossible. “Admiral Garland acted as best as she could, given what she knew at the time… and few sane commanders would have risked sneaking an entire fleet up under cloak. Now…”

Colin listened, grimly. He’d never considered anything so insane, although he had taken his superdreadnaughts to Pollack, pretending to be friendly units until the moment he’d dropped the pretence and opened fire on their command fortress. Admiral Wilhelm had guts, if nothing else, and a willingness to gamble. It worried him, more than he cared to admit to anyone, but David; what if he couldn’t outthink or outfight him? Space warfare was simple, at least at the strategic level, but there was nothing unique about Colin’s own insights. Despite the Empire’s best efforts, no one had a monopoly on military tactics, or insights.

He tapped the table, bringing the remaining argument to an end. “We have some choices to make,” he said, knowing that some of them would prove unpopular. “First, we will gather every major capital ship we can here, at Earth, before sending reinforcements to Admiral Garland and her base, if it holds out long enough.” He doubted that Admiral Wilhelm would suffer it to continue to exist any longer than he absolutely had to tolerate it. “Secondarily, we will focus on

enhancing the defences of the worlds in his path as much as we can, without endangering Earth."

There was a pause. The blunt truth was that it was impossible to defend every world in sufficient strength to protect it from the entire Cottbus Sector Fleet, let alone the combined might of four sectors. Colin knew that — and, indeed, had counted on it when he'd been fighting the Empire — and he also knew that the first-rank worlds wouldn't take it kindly. If they were lucky, they might even have a chance to survive long enough to protest in Parliament.

"Thirdly, we will dispatch raiding units into the Cottbus Sector to enhance Admiral Garland's efforts and force Admiral Wilhelm to divert his own units to cover his rear," he concluded. "Time, for once, is on our side. We merely have to cover three places long enough to bring the new ships into production and then we can drive on Cottbus and bring the war to an end."

He watched them all filing out of the room, leaving him alone. It all seemed so futile and hopeless, even though he knew that it wasn't hopeless, not yet. The truth was simple; they could stop Admiral Wilhelm eventually, but would it be in time to save the reformed Empire? If the Admiral came directly at Earth, the cost of stopping him would be horrific, in both blood and treasure… and the Empire might come apart. The first-rank worlds would seek their independence, the second and third-rank worlds would take the remainder of the Family businesses and facilities and chaos would spread everywhere. The rule of law would be broken. The only good aspect of the entire crisis was that it might unite Parliament against Admiral Wilhelm…

The starchart glowed in front of him, almost mocking him. Defeat was unthinkable… and yet, the Empire had thought the same. They hadn't believed that they could be defeated, until it was too late. Was *his* Empire going to go the same way… and fall down straight into chaos? Was that how the story was going to end?

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Admiral, we have unidentified starships at the edge of the system."

Admiral Katy Garland nodded from her command chair. The shortage of experienced personnel — and the casualties caused by the Battle of Cottbus — had forced her to take command directly of the *Jefferson*, while sending Captain Chalker to command the *Franklin*, which had lost its commanding officer to a lucky hit. Katy was still astonished that the superdreadnaught had been damaged at all, but according to the engineers, the shield generators hadn't been properly calibrated for the mission. It had been the result of the fleet setting out too early, without a proper period of working up where all such flaws would have been removed, but she couldn't help feeling that it was a bad omen. The Imperial Navy was desperately short of experienced personnel.

"I expected as much," she said, trying to paste a confident expression on her face. The once-proud 2nd Fleet had been seriously dented, but the fortnight they'd spent in orbit around Hawthorn hadn't been entirely wasted. The nine superdreadnaughts they'd salvaged from the battle had been worked up to the best of their ability and had been over-crewed, while the smaller ships had been carefully prepared for the coming engagement. "General signal to all ships; execute Plan Romeo."

"Aye, Admiral," the communications officer said. "The fleet is acknowledging. They're standing by."

"Good," Katy said. She looked over towards the helmsman. "Helm, take us to Position Alpha."

The mighty superdreadnaught thrummed into life as the main drive fields kicked in, pushing it out of orbit and up towards the edge of the gravity shadow, followed by the remainder of the fleet. Katy was mildly surprised that Admiral Wilhelm hadn't arrived already — by her most optimistic estimate, he should have arrived at least a week ago — but perhaps they'd hurt them worse than they'd thought. Post-battle analysis had suggested that they'd handed out a beating, but hardly enough to deter him from continuing his war against the Provisional Government. He had to know that the Provisional Government wouldn't allow him to take his winnings and leave the table, so he had little choice, but to continue on to Earth… which meant taking Hawthorn. The same iron logic that had forced Colin to engage Morrison would force Admiral Wilhelm to engage Hawthorn, or risk losing his rear to her attacks.

She tapped her console and called up the intelligence from the

Freebooters. It had astonished her to discover just how far the Freebooter intelligent net actually extended, right into Cottbus itself, and she was more than a little annoyed that she hadn't been given access at once. She wondered, in fact, if Colin himself knew just how far the network stretched, although it was hardly an Imperial Intelligence-style network. It tended to concentrate more on Imperial Navy officers who could be bribed, or who had no objections to selling Imperial Navy supplies to the Freebooters — or pirates, or even rebels — but it did include a surprising amount of political information. One piece of data, linked into clues that Imperial Intelligence had picked up, suggested the location of a supply base. She intended to deal with it as soon as she abandoned Hawthorn.

"The enemy starships appear to have flickered out," the sensor officer said. "They could be…"

An alarm sounded. "Emergence, multiple starships," the sensor officer said, as her display updated. "I'm reading three squadrons of superdreadnaughts, with escorts."

"So we're only outgunned two to one," Katy said, wryly. In theory, her nine *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts should have been able to stand up to two squadrons of *General*-class superdreadnaughts, but no one had tried in practice. The three squadrons of superdreadnaughts that Admiral Wilhelm had deployed — she wondered, absently, if he was actually commanding the force — shouldn't have any difficulty dealing with her ships in a straight fight. "Run a tactical analysis and put the results up on the main display."

She smiled as the conflicting vectors appeared on the display. Admiral Wilhelm had decided to be careful, taking account of the Hawthorn System's odd nature. His starships hadn't emerged close enough to the planet to prevent her from making her escape — the starships flickering in at the edge of the system had been enough to give her advance warning, unless he had intended to warn her all along — and they were too close to risk flickering closer. She hoped that they would try — the odds favoured crashing right into the gravity shadow — but she doubted that they would attempt anything of the sort. They wouldn't have to take any risks at all to take Hawthorn.

"We're up a signal," the communications officer said. "They're demanding our surrender."

"No reply," Katy said, watching the display. The enemy fleet was sorting out its vectors now, angling in to engage them as they departed the gravity shadow, but it was too late to trap them. A few thousand kilometres closer to the planet and they could have smashed her entire fleet without risking serious losses themselves. "They

already know what we would want to say to them."

She watched as the squadron came alive around the *Jefferson*, escorts falling into their positions, ready to intercept missiles when the Cottbus Fleet opened fire, bringing up the data network to coordinate their fire. She'd studied the records carefully from Cottbus and point defence was, it seemed, one of their few advantages. They might be able to hold their own in a long-range missile duel… and even if they couldn't defeat the enemy fleet, they could hit it hard enough to force them to be careful. She'd already pre-placed several dozen freighters in interstellar space, ready to reload her ships with missiles and other weapons, and she didn't have to worry about expenditure. The enemy wouldn't have the same concerns. She'd taken the precaution of rigging Hawthorn's industrial nodes to self-destruct once her fleet left the system.

And I could flee the system, she thought, before shaking her head. Her crew needed a victory and even if that meant taking some risks, there was no choice. We have to force an engagement on our terms, just to convince my people that we can take them down.

"Now clearing the gravity shadow, Admiral," the helmsman said.

"Follow the Plan Romeo course," Katy said, watching as the enemy fleet altered course slightly. They hadn't realised it, but they had been outmanoeuvred; in the time it would take them to alter the course of their superdreadnaughts, they would have been committed to a stern chase… or to abandoning her fleet and allowing them to escape without engagement. She had a small bet going with herself that the enemy would have no choice, but to turn to engage, knowing that if she vanished, they might see her next at Cottbus. "Tactical, run an engagement profile, but withhold the arsenal ships."

The tactical officer blinked. "Admiral?"

"Withhold the arsenal ships," Katy said. She would have preferred to add them to her firepower, but if she shot them dry, the enemy fleet would simply flicker out and escape. They'd come back to Cottbus completely undamaged. "Order them to flicker out as soon as they are targeted and engaged."

The superdreadnaught shivered slightly as it rolled onto the new course, daring the enemy to follow. Katy smiled to herself as the enemy fleet altered course, slowing their ships before picking up the chase, trying to catch her ships. The superdreadnaughts she'd kept with her hadn't been damaged badly enough to slow their escape, but the starships' ECM was working to convince the enemy that they were chasing nine near-cripples. It was even possible that they believed that the superdreadnaughts were unable to flicker out, although she cautioned herself not to believe that, not when it would have been too convenient.

“Enemy ships will enter firing range in ten minutes,” the tactical officer said. The superdreadnaught shuddered as it launched a spread of probes towards the enemy fleet, picking apart their ECM and targeting each of their starships specifically. They would have no place to hide — although, Katy admitted silently, they wouldn’t need a place to hide from her weaker fleet. “Targeting priorities?”

Katy scowled. If they’d had equal strength to the Cottbus fleet, she wouldn’t have hesitated to expend the first salvo on their escorts, trusting in her own point defence to shield her superdreadnaughts while she stripped theirs of most of their cover. They would probably be thinking along the same lines, of course. Without equal strength, they had to take down as many superdreadnaughts as they could, not least because the combined strength of four sectors would certainly give the Shadow Fleet a nasty time.

“Pick two superdreadnaughts and engage them when they enter missile range,” she ordered, calmly. The display flickered as the tactical officer picked two of the lead superdreadnaughts and targeted them for destruction. “Configure a third of the missiles for advanced penetration. Let’s see how good their point defence is in a fair fight.”

She leaned back in her command chair and watched as the red icons slowly overhauled her fleet. The enemy commander had to be spitting rocks by now, she thought; if she’d been further away, he could have flickered closer to her position, but if he risked it now he might lose her altogether. Worse, he might even expose himself to losing a handful of superdreadnaughts to her fleet, leaving him with no choice, but a stern chase. The timer ticked down as tension rose on the bridge; it was almost a relief when the superdreadnaught rolled and flushed its external racks towards the enemy fleet.

“Missiles away,” the tactical officer said. The superdreadnaught shuddered again as it unleashed the first salvo from its internal tubes. “Internal tubes away… now!”

Katy tensed as the enemy superdreadnaughts, dark and silent, closed in on her position. The enemy commander wasn’t firing, not yet, knowing that most of his missiles would burn out before they reached her point defence range. Logically, he would hold his fire for two more minutes, while her missiles screamed towards his point defence envelope, but he’d have to fire before her missiles actually engaged his ships. A single hit on the external racks could have disastrous consequences for any superdreadnaught. She doubted that they would be so lucky as to actually trigger enemy warheads, but if they damaged the external racks it might be impossible for them to separate their racks and fire their internal tubes.

“Enemy force has opened fire,” the tactical officer said, as the display sparkled with red icons, each one promising death and

destruction for her fleet. “Time to engagement range, two minutes.”

Too bloody long, Katy thought, coldly. The enemy missiles were caught in the stern chase as well, but without the need to take care of human crews, they could travel much faster, overhauling her ships with ease. *Her* missiles took advantage of the closing speed between her ships and the enemy ships, but the enemy missiles had to work to close the gap. It was going to be a frustrating experience for them.

“Link point defence into a rear defence formation,” she ordered, watching as the enemy point defence sparkled with light and engaged her missiles. The closing speed was greater than they would normally have to handle, but they’d practiced to take on arsenal ships and heavier missile barrages than anyone had deployed, before the rebellion. “Continue to fire when the tubes are reloaded.”

One of the targeted enemy superdreadnaughts staggered and fell out of formation, wreaked by internal damage, while the other blew apart in a sheet of superhot plasma. The first ship, she noted, was spewing out lifepods, suggesting that the ship had been badly damaged and had perhaps even lost damage control. The survivors wouldn’t have to worry about being picked up by hostile forces, she saw; the enemy commander had detached a pair of light cruisers to pick them up. It was a considerate thought and suggested that Admiral Wilhelm, whatever drove him, had earned the loyalty of his crews. It would make him a far more dangerous opponent than Admiral Percival.

The tactical officer worked his console as the follow-up salvos adjusted their attack profiles, focusing on new targets. The Geek-designed systems worked well, but Katy was dismayed to see just how quickly the enemy point defence adjusted to the incoming missiles. The point defence weapons hadn’t been seriously improved, much to her relief, but the point defence sensors had been improved to the point where they would have been capable of countering her attacks, if they’d had better weapons.

“That can’t be coincidence,” she realised, grimly. “Someone sold them the details behind our weapons and sensors.”

“It looks that way,” the tactical officer agreed. He scowled down at his console as the missiles laboured to catch up. “Their ECM is slightly obscured, but it reads out as rather like a Mark-XXI system.”

One the Geeks invented, Katy thought, feeling her blood run cold. If Cottbus had such systems in deployment — and that took more time than most laymen appreciated — what else did they have in their arsenal? How had they done it? Did they have spies within the Jupiter Shipyards, or even the Rim shipyards? If they knew where they were, they could attack them… and a successful attack on the Geek-built shipyards would cripple the Shadow Fleet. *Who the hell sold our secrets*

to them?

"Incoming missiles," the tactical officer said. The tactical display altered itself, focusing in on the incoming missiles, as he spoke. Katy could have altered it back, but there was little point. If the point defence network failed them, they would have no choice, but to run for their lives. "Entering point defence engagement range now."

Katy watched, already knowing what she would see. The enemy missiles were flying right into the teeth of her point defence, but their penetration capabilities and support systems were literally years ahead of anything they should have possessed. Incoming missiles, particularly in a stern chase, were easy to detect, but these missiles moved with the same capabilities as the Shadow Fleet's missiles… and some of them were slipping through the point defence.

We didn't see all of this at Cottbus, she thought, as the first missiles slipped through the defences and slammed into a superdreadnaught, concentrating on knocking down its shields. The thought was galling, but it had to be accepted. If she had refused battle at Hawthorn, she wouldn't have known about the improvements in Admiral Wilhelm's systems until it was too late. *We're going to have to go into every system on the assumption we're facing modern systems…*

She scowled. She'd spent two years in the Logistics Department of the Imperial Navy, before being assigned to the *Havoc* as First Officer, and she had a rough idea of just how hard it was to get modern hardware out into the hands of people who needed it. The Sector Fleets on the Frontier tended to be better equipped than those in the interior sectors, but it wasn't uncommon for modern hardware, stolen by corrupt officers in various logistic hubs, to get out to pirates first before reaching the Imperial Navy. No matter how much technology Admiral Wilhelm had obtained, from whoever it was who was supplying him, there would be hard and fast limits.

The problem seemed insolvable, but she had enough experience to figure out parts of it. Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't have sent modern hardware to worlds that weren't directly involved in his war effort, because that would have been nothing, but a waste. He would have needed to arm four sector fleets, which suggested that he wouldn't have had enough modern hardware to equip his worlds anyway, with the exception of Cottbus. The logic seemed tempting enough, but logic, in so many ways, was merely a way to be wrong with confidence. The only way to know for sure would be to attack one of his logistics hubs and see what happened.

In other words, no changes there, then, she thought dryly. The concept of up-to-date intelligence in modern warfare was something of a joke. The enemy would have days, if not weeks, to change everything before her forces arrived. *At least we can run a Freebooter or*

two through the system first.

She looked up as the superdreadnaught twitched, and then expelled another flight of missiles towards the enemy fleet. The range was closing now as both sides went to rapid fire and, at such ranges, the enemy's superiority in missile weight would begin to tell. She watched dispassionately as they launched wave after wave of missiles, staggering the launches so that her point defence would always be engaged, and knew that it was time to disengage.

"Helm, prepare to flicker out," she ordered, watching as the enemy fleet launched another wave of missiles. If they were lucky, the fleet would waste hundreds of missiles on targets that weren't there any more. "Communications, inform the other ships to follow us out to the first waypoint on my command. I think its time to leave."

She smiled as the enemy missiles closed in on her position, her point defence opening fire to engage them. "Flicker," she ordered. She braced herself as soon as she issued the order. "Take us out of here."

The burst of nausea shocked her, as always, but it was driven away by relief and amusement. She'd destroyed one superdreadnaught and badly damaged two more, for no losses at all, beyond minor damage. By almost any standard, it was an excellent naval victory and one that would restore confidence to her entire remaining fleet. She could almost forget just how bad the odds actually were… and just how low their chances of actually surviving had become.

"Set course for the second waypoint as soon as we reach the first," she ordered, as she called up the tactical map of the sector. Oddly, being away from Hawthorn had left her feeling rather free, almost like old times. "We'll reload… and then we have some raiding to do."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Charlie, who had been expecting poor Andy Gillingham to have been picked up by the local security forces — those loyal to Admiral Wilhelm, rather than the Empire — had been surprised when he sent messages to Sandra, and then shown up at her apartment. He'd suspected a trap from the start and had watched carefully, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it seemed that they'd been either missed or Admiral Wilhelm had decided to leave them completely alone. It had taken two days of worrying before he'd realised the truth; Admiral Wilhelm's people didn't know that Andy Gillingham was their unwilling asset.

It made a grim kind of sense. The shipyards were, literally, over-crewed. Admiral Wilhelm had brought in trained personnel from four different sectors, just to ensure that he had enough starships and supplies to fight his war against the Provisional Government. Charlie had expected Gillingham and his fellows to be kept on the shipyards all the time, now that one of them had been revealed as a spy, but how could they all be crammed together indefinitely? The shipyard production rates might have fallen if morale had been allowed to fall… and cutting shore leave would have guaranteed a fall in morale. Gillingham and his fellows had to be allowed to land on the planet, if only for a few hours at a time, or the entire war effort would suffer.

The Empire, in its heyday, would have brought everyone who could have reasonably have sent the warning signal — as useless as it had been — and run them through a full interrogation, designed to sniff out any treacherous thoughts or mental conditioning. Charlie had expected that as well — and Gillingham, despite not having been properly conditioned, might well have been detected — but that too would have ruined morale. Colin had found so much support because the Empire mistreated everyone who didn't have the right bloodline, but Admiral Wilhelm didn't even have the kind of legitimacy provided by a thousand years of unbroken rule. If he treated his people badly, they might revolt against him and destroy his support base. If the shipyard were to be taken out, his entire war effort would grind to a halt.

They'd followed, as best as they could, the battle and its aftermath. The news channels had been full of propaganda — someone from Public Information had clearly gone to work for the Admiral — and had been claiming the complete destruction of the rebel fleet. There were other signs, however, that suggested otherwise, including the presence of two superdreadnaught squadrons in orbit and the rapid enhancement of the orbital defence network. Admiral

Wilhelm was clearly worried about an attack on Cottbus — one carried out by units aware, now, that there would be no peace until Admiral Wilhelm was killed or forced to surrender — and it showed. The only question was who might be inclined to take advantage of it.

He wandered over to the terminal and checked it carefully. Admiral Wilhelm and his security officers would have been horrified to know that it existed, assuming that they didn't already. The Empire-designed computer networks that existed on most planets, including Cottbus, were perfectly transparent to anyone who had the right command codes, allowing Imperial Intelligence to track everyone's usage with ease. If someone was a suspected rebel, Imperial Intelligence could open their files and browse them carefully, looking for evidence or information they could use to support their claim — and encryption was forbidden, as was the development of secondary computer networks. The transparency of the system was common knowledge and very few used it for anything secure — apart from the Thousand Families, who were allowed private military-grade encryption — but it could still be useful. Sasha had ordered him to probe into the computers and see if they could locate anyone who might be helpful.

Admiral Wilhelm's people had closed some of the access links into the system, including two that he was fairly sure that no one outside of Imperial Intelligence should have known about, but they hadn't removed all of the private access codes. They were hardwired into the system, part of its very design, and gave whoever had access complete control of the system. It was a pity that the planetary system wasn't connected to the orbiting shipyards or orbital fortresses, he'd reflected when he started to hack into the system, or they could have sabotaged them with comparative ease. The Imperial Navy had refused to allow such links; a wise precaution, as it turned out. It was difficult to hack into a starship's systems unless you were already on the inside.

He called up Gillingham's file and read it thoughtfully. There was nothing there to suggest that he was under suspicion; indeed, most of his boasts to Sandra had been plain fact. He *was* an important figure, he *was* being promoted as fast as he could manage it — and earn it, unlike most of the pre-war superior officers — and he didn't seem to have any rebel leanings. Sandra's covert interrogations had convinced her that while he was a decent man, he was also loyal to Admiral Wilhelm, the person who had given him the chance to shine. Given time, she could alter that, conditioning him to their side, but the more changes she made, the greater the chance that it would be picked up upon by counter-intelligence. Once Gillingham had been identified as their unwitting ally, they would certainly be exposed and captured. He doubted that Admiral Wilhelm would order them treated as

standard prisoners of war.

And there was no escape from the planet. Admiral Wilhelm's ban on any starships leaving the planet, apart from his warships, would have an effect on the system's economy, but that wouldn't be an immediate threat. The three agents could have vanished into the underground and completely disappeared from view — a planet was a large place, after all — but that would have ended any chance they had to strike back and complete their mission. The problem was that he couldn't see any way to complete the mission anyway. It wasn't that easy to trigger the self-destruct systems on orbital fortresses, or the shipyards, which meant… what?

Somewhere, there will be a rebel, Charlie thought, and smiled. He called up other files and started to skim through them thoughtfully. Admiral Wilhelm might talk the talk about wanting to bring democracy to his sector, but so far it was nothing, but military rule. He might have embraced the concept of rewarding competence, unlike most of the other Admirals, but there would still be winners and losers. The only task would be to find them.

He checked the sensor in Sandra's room, unsurprised to see that she and Gillingham were making love again with a passion that seemed genuine, at least on his side, and carefully placed the terminal in the secure box. Sasha had been out exploring the Cottbus nightlife, learning where the fault lines lay between the Imperial Navy and the criminal sector, and it was time to meet her. Between them, they could find a rebel, no matter how reluctant, and build him up into a real threat.

* * *

The *Vacuum Sucker* was a fairly typical spacers bar. It was large, cheap and cramped; Charlie was unable to move quickly, just for the sheer press of bodies. Given it's rating in the guide, it probably hosted only crewmen and junior officers, mainly the handful of mustangs in the Imperial Navy. Admiral Wilhelm had embraced the concept of promoting mustangs to command rank with all the fervour of the converted and the results had been impressive. Like Colin before him, he had seen the potential that was ruthlessly suppressed and had taken advantage of it, even though he was maintaining his own power base at the same time. How long would it be, Charlie wondered as he searched for Sasha amidst the crewers, before someone arose to challenge him?

He smiled as he passed through a handful of girls towards one of the private booths at the rear of the bar. Spacers were easy marks for

women of easy virtue and hundreds of them, some working professionals, others merely out for a good time, gravitated towards every spacer bar in the city. They would give their victim a good time in exchange for being wined, dined and feted with presents, rather like girls like them had been doing since time out of mind. The spacers, who didn't have anything to spend their money on while in space, took part quite happily, seeking someone — anyone — so that they wouldn't have to spend the nights alone. The bar, and the hundreds of other establishments, even offered rooms for the night, although several couples in darkened corners hadn't bothered to wait. He watched, tracking how the women moved and pulled their marks out of the mass of spacers drinking and laughing as they celebrated the battle, and shook his head. There might have been little difference, at bottom, between them and Sandra, but at least Sandra had style.

The buzz of conversation rose up around him and he listened, carefully, without seeming to listen. It was a skill he'd learnt back when he'd been recruited into Imperial Intelligence and it served him well. The main body of clientele were from the orbiting fortresses, cheering their victory, even if the fleet had largely won the battle. There was an ongoing rivalry between fortress crews and starship crewmen — even though there was supposed to be an ongoing exchange program between the two divisions of the fleet — and it turned violent at times. Most of the discussions involved resentments, real or imagined, about how the starship crews were going to win glory in the Empire, while they were stuck at home. It reminded him of Colin's speech before the Battle of Earth. The fortress crews might have been a vital part of Admiral Wilhelm's war effort, but they didn't feel that way.

He slipped into the booth and nodded politely to Sasha and her dining companion. He was a young man, at least in appearance, but Charlie could pick out the subtle clues that suggested that he was at least fifty years old, with an expression to match. Charlie pegged him at once. He had been passed over for promotion, not once, but many times, and wore his bitterness on his sleeve. His face might have been handsome under other circumstances — he suspected that he'd changed it in hopes of becoming more successful — but now, it had a worn, almost hangdog look.

"This is Peter," Sasha said, introducing him. "Peter, this is Charlie, an associate of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," Peter drawled. His voice alone might have explained his lack of promotion. It was filled with a curious mixture of arrogance and fear, like a dog that expected to be kicked again. "Is he going to help me get promoted as well?"

Charlie couldn't help himself; he checked, quickly, to see if the counter-surveillance field was operating. Even using it was dangerous, assuming that Admiral Wilhelm's forces ran a security sweep, but there was an odd kind of security in the bar. Very few security officers, even the dreaded SD Troopers, would enter such a bar without heavily armed backup. The crewers might turn on them, secure in the sheer weight of numbers, and beat hell out of them. It had happened before.

"Don't worry," Sasha said, shooting him a glance. "We can't be heard here."

Peter, who had clearly been drinking heavily, kept talking with a surprising lack of discretion. It wasn't hard to guess that he had been involved in several rackets to supply Imperial Navy technology onto the black market, nor that he knew most of the smugglers and criminals in the port personally. To hear him talk, he was a great successes at the gaming tables, but Charlie suspected that the truth was that he lost heavily and was deeply in debt to the local criminal fraternity. Admiral Wilhelm's sweep, as soon as he'd taken overt control, had wiped out most of the criminals, but like cockroaches, they were very hard to kill. Enough remained to keep Peter firmly in their debt, even if they were keeping their heads down…

Idiots, Charlie thought, coldly. Imperial Intelligence had plenty of experience operating in such an environment. *They can get us pretty much whatever we want.*

He listened as Peter, his tongue loosened by all the drink, chatted away about everything and nothing. He was a second-level supply clerk — not even a Midshipman, as he complained — on the command fortress, but that was about as far as he could hope to rise. A properly-run organisation would have disposed of him long ago, unless there was no choice… and Admiral Wilhelm was clearly short of experienced crewmen. If he'd been on a superdreadnaught, he would have been discharged years ago, or sent somewhere where he could drink himself to death peacefully. He didn't see it that way, of course. To him, his lack of promotion prospects was the result of conspiracy by his jealous superiors, who feared what he would do if promoted to higher rank. The irony, Charlie decided, was that they might have been right. A lowly supply clerk couldn't do *that* much to rot away at the Imperial Navy, but someone more senior…

Or perhaps they want to keep their rackets to themselves, he thought, cynically.

"We are prepared to pay you ten thousand credits for services," Sasha said, finally. They'd spent nearly two hours listening to him, learning much about the command fortress, but little of any real use. Charlie had seriously considered suggesting taking Peter back to their

apartment and allowing Sandra to work her will on him, but that might have been revealing. “We require your knowledge of the local personnel.”

“Anyone,” Peter assured her, reaching for yet another drink from the robotic servitor. “You want anything, I know someone who can supply it, for a price. What do you want, lady?”

Sasha’s lips quirked into something that might have been mistaken for a smile. “Rebels,” she said, flatly. “There will be a rebel cell somewhere around and I want to meet them. Who are they?”

Peter stared at her, his mind numbed by the drink. “Rebels?” He asked, blearily. “You want to talk to rebels? Rebels on the command deck, what?”

Sasha merely looked at him. “Yeah, I can introduce you to rebels,” Peter said, finally. “Why do you want to talk to them?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Sasha said. Charlie allowed himself a moment of relief. Peter might have been so drunk that he couldn’t tell the difference between right and wrong, but once he sobered up, he might come to the right conclusion and start attempting to blackmail them for credits. Worse, he might blunder and bring the local security forces down on their heads. “I will give you ten thousand credits for an introduction to the local rebel cell.”

“Of course, of course,” Peter said. He pushed the last drink aside and stood up. “I will find you a rebel, great lady. Just you wait and see.”

Charlie frowned as Peter left the booth. “Are you sure…?”

“Yes,” Sasha said. “There were rebel cells everywhere, remember?”

Charlie nodded. Back at the start of the rebellion, just before the Battle of Harmony, Colin had sent a pair of messages though the ICN, using Geek-level software hacks to ensure that the message reached everywhere connected to the ICN, despite the best efforts of Imperial Intelligence. The first message had told everyone about the rebellion — which Admiral Percival had tried to hush up — and the second had told young officers just how to rebel. It had included practical advice on forming a cell, taking control of their starships and remaining hidden until it was time to strike. The message had spread far and wide, even into Cottbus itself… and the advancing Shadow Fleet had found rebel cells everywhere. They’d even been reinforced by new starships after the crews had mutinied and taken the ship.

And there would definitely be a rebel cell or more on Cottbus. It hadn’t been unknown for there to be several cells, each operating in ignorance of the other cells, to exist on a planet… and even though Admiral Wilhelm was respected, there would definitely be a cell on the planet. He doubted that Peter would know everyone in a cell, but

he might well know one or two people who were involved with a cell, even if he wasn't a rebel himself. The amount he drank, Charlie decided, suggested that any halfway sane cell would consider him a security risk.

He scowled as the waitress, a woman wearing only a bra and panties combination, came over and offered them both a drink, doing it in a manner that suggested that she could be bought, for a suitable price. He wasn't too tempted. The patrons had probably had her already, in many places. She turned away, disappointed, revealing a shapely bottom, which was patted quickly by Peter as he came back with a young Midshipman. Charlie tensed inwardly. If Peter had made a mistake, their cover was about to be ripped away.

"I'm Midshipman Quinn," the young man said. Charlie read his nametag and nodded. There was little point in trying to hide names when he was in uniform. "I understand that you wanted to see me?"

"One moment," Sasha said. She called over the waitress, slipped her credit chip several hundred credits, and asked her to take care of Peter. Once they were gone, she turned back to Quinn and smiled. "We were told that you were the person we needed to talk to. You see, we're from the Shadow Fleet."

Quinn's eyes went wide. Charlie watched with genuine amusement. The young man was genuine, all right. He wasn't old enough to have perfect control over his expressions, although clearly he was already sick of the system. It made him a perfect rebel. It looked as if they'd hit pay dirt.

"Really?" He asked, finally. Caution warred with optimism in his voice. "Can you prove that?"

"Of course," Sasha said. "Can you prove what you are?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Daria walked into the room as if she owned it and sat down on a chair that had been old when the Empire had been formed from the ashes of the Federation. Tiberius watched, barely concealing the wince that formed in his heart, even though it was an ugly chair and worth very little, at least as far as he was concerned. His father had told him that someone had forged it, based on a far old design, and that the Family had kept it to illustrate a point. If he had known what that point actually was, he'd never had time to share it with his son.

He took his own seat more casually and smiled. "Jason will do as he is told," he said, without bothering with any preamble. It wasn't safe for her to stay too long at his estate, even though it was one of a handful of places where they could be sure of complete privacy. The official reason for the meeting, a discussion about Freebooter ships working to support Cicero mining interests, wouldn't hold up under careful scrutiny. Somehow, it was hard to imagine that Colin wasn't aware of some of their plans and that he was preparing a deadly counterattack. "I hit him with both the carrot and the stick."

"Good," Daria said, smoothly. Her gaze fell to the piece of artwork on the mantle. Dathi artwork was rare throughout the Empire, not least because it was officially banned and regarded as almost blasphemous by the commoners, who would quite happily report anyone possessing a piece without a special licence. Tiberius disliked it, even though it served a purpose; he had the nagging feeling that there was some message in the artwork that was lurking at the very edge of perception. One of his ancestors had collected several pieces, picked up from the ruined and blasted worlds that had been left orbiting uncaring stars, but he would have preferred to dispose of them. Like most of the Family's vast collection, placed within a bombproof shelter deep below the estate, it was left alone unless it came back into fashion. "We do not want to lose either him or Lady Tyler."

Tiberius frowned. "She did give up her title," he pointed out. "Do we really need to keep her even if she agrees to join us?"

Daria smiled. "She's the most competent person running the Empire's economy in the last fifty years," she said. "Yes, we need her, if only to provide a degree of continuity that would otherwise be lacking. She isn't exactly Gwendolyn, of course, but she's someone we're going to need and someone we have a hold on."

"She could have reclaimed her title at any time," he said, remembering a brief discussion with Lord Tyler. Unlike Jason Cordova, Kathy had never been disowned by her Family, despite her

allegiance to the rebels. “She chose not to reclaim it. Can she be trusted?”

“Very few people can be trusted,” Daria said. There was a mocking, almost amused, note in her voice, an icy reminder that she’d been betrayed and forced to flee her throne. “People are governed by self-interest. I dare say that Colin could find something to break the ties between you and I, if he knew about us and decided that it was a good idea.”

“He couldn’t,” Tiberius protested. What was it about her that made him obedient? It wasn’t just her legend, or the covert support she could call on from the most surprising places, but something else. She reminded him of Joshua, but older and sharper… and perhaps more ruthless. “What could he find to offer me?”

Daria shrugged. “It hardly matters,” she said, absently. “Have you and Alicia finally set a date for the wedding?”

The sudden change in the subject caught Tiberius by surprise. “Two weeks,” he said, finally. He hadn’t wanted a fancy wedding, knowing that almost all Family weddings ended in divorce, but Alicia’s Family had insisted. It was important, more than ever, to give the Cicero Clan a Heir, but it would also create a weakness in his defences. If one of his enemies took his child and used him or her against him… the result could be disastrous. “I trust that Daria, Leader of the Freebooters, will be attending?”

“I have my own matters to attend to,” Daria said. As Empress, she would be expected to attend such weddings, but until she took her throne back, she could avoid them at will, even though Tiberius could send her an invitation. It was going to be the most cosmopolitan wedding of the decade, with hundreds of commoners who’d found places in the new government, including the MPs, invited to attend. He even hoped that Colin and Cordova would attend. “Perhaps the wedding would make a suitable moment to assassinate Colin?”

Tiberius flinched slightly. “I thought you liked him,” he protested. “How can you cold-bloodily contemplate his death?”

“I do like — and respect — him,” Daria said, an odd note in her voice. “I also know that he will bring down the Empire if he continues to push forward his reformation program, with or without the threat from Admiral Wilhelm. That cannot be allowed. Colin may be operating from the best possible motives, but he cannot be continue with the Empire itself at stake. I thought that he could be controlled, given time, but he’s decided to be his own man. We have no choice, but to remove him.”

“I see,” Tiberius said. He thought of Alicia, an innocent insofar as any of the Families were innocent, and felt an odd pang. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought it was love… and guilt. “You

can't use my wedding as an assassination venue."

"Why not?" Daria asked, dryly. She looked up at the chart of the High City that had been placed on one wall. "The only way to get at Colin in the High City relies on luck or extreme force… and neither are guaranteed. A single shipkiller would destroy the entire city — and most of the surrounding continent — but launching one and getting it through the defences would be tricky. It would also tip our hand, while slipping an assassin through the security network would be almost impossible. The Marines are, after all, very good at their job… and loyal to Colin. We cannot subvert one of them without revealing our presence."

Tiberius scowled. "Marines are human, aren't they?" He said, remembering Joshua's straight-faced assertion that Marines ate nails for breakfast and chewed raw iron for lunch and dinner. "They can be conditioned to obey us…"

"Not without breaking the implants they have inserted into their brains, designed to prevent someone with a few bright ideas from doing just that," Daria said, flatly. "The only way to get a conditioned Marine into the Corps would be to condition the person before they started their training and that would take time we don't have. Most of the original High City staff were cleared out when Colin's forces took over the city, so we don't even have access to them."

"A pleasure slave?" Tiberius asked. He didn't know how Daria controlled them — it should have been impossible and, had it not been for the death of Lord Roosevelt, he would have thought that it was impossible — but she did, somehow. "Why can't one of them be used to assassinate Colin?"

"He doesn't use any of the ones assigned to the High City," Daria said. There was an unmistakable note of frustration in her voice. "I don't know if he doesn't use them because he finds them creepy, as many people do, or because he feels that he shouldn't be taking advantage of his position, but he never lets one close enough to him to do anything nasty to him." She scowled. "Besides, it's hard to slip them specific instructions."

Tiberius considered it thoughtfully. He'd had all of his pleasure slaves studied carefully after Lord Roosevelt's death and they'd found nothing. They'd just been pleasure slaves… but the Roosevelt Clan's security agents would have studied the remains of the assassin after she'd been killed, and compared it to their security checks before accepting her into the household. They hadn't found anything either, but the death had broken the Roosevelt Clan. Daria's admission that it was hard to slip them specific instructions meant… what?

"I see," he said, shaking his head. It was time to be honest and open. "I don't like the thought of using a wedding as an assassination

venue."

"*A* wedding or *your* wedding?"

Tiberius winced. "My wedding, yes," he admitted. "Your Majesty, I don't like the thought of exposing either myself or Alicia to an assassination attempt."

"The attempt will be aimed at Colin, not you," Daria assured him. Her voice softened slightly. "Besides, can you think of any better time to take a shot at him?"

"No," Tiberius admitted. As long as Colin was careful, and he had two very competent security officers looking out for him, he would remain fairly safe. The wedding might be the only chance to take him out of the game before it was too late to reform the Empire on their terms. "Are you sure that we can move at once to take control?"

Daria nodded, without going into specifics. "Yes," she said, flatly. "We can take control at once." She leaned forward. "And you have my word that neither yourself nor your wife will be in any real danger. The only person targeted will be Colin."

"How reassuring," Tiberius said. He claimed no special expertise at military matters, but Joshua had taught him how quickly matters could spin out of control. An inch of prevention, he'd said, was far better than a mile of cure. "If you believe that there is no choice…"

Daria smiled like a little girl. "There is none," she said. "Believe me, if we fail now, the Families will be swept away and destroyed, along with most of the Empire."

"Unless Admiral Wilhelm takes control of Earth," Tiberius said grimly. "Are you sure that we can best him if we have to fight him?"

"Admiral Wilhelm doesn't have either the past legitimacy of the Thousand Families — and me, of course — or Colin's democratic state," Daria said, flatly. "He may have united four Admirals under his banner, but that won't last if they do take Earth, not when they could fall out and make a grab for the throne themselves. It's what happened to Angus, a long time ago; his grab for the throne and a chain of successors was eventually defeated by your own ancestors. They chose to share out the booty rather than win or lose it all."

Tiberius nodded slowly, taking her point. Admiral Wilhelm would only drag the Empire further down into disintegration and chaos, even if he won the war, which would only shatter the Empire and destroy humanity's unity once and for all. Colin's plan for a federal Empire would be preferable, even if that risked a power struggle between Earth and the outer worlds that would tear the Empire in two. No, the Empire needed a strong man — or woman — at the helm, who could instigate a process of reform while preventing it from spinning out of control.

If that's possible, he thought, bitterly. The Empire had changed so

much in the months since he'd first heard that Colin Harper, a mere Commander, had raised the standard of rebellion in the Harmony Sector. Who would have believed that the very foundations of the Empire would shake and the Thousand Families — and the Empress they'd betrayed — would be forced to skulk around on Earth, the seat of their power, plotting to tear down a man many of them feared and hated? No one would have predicted that it would come to this — no one, apart from Colin… and the woman facing him, smiling a very slight smile. It was at times like that when he wondered how she managed to fool the remainder of the Thousand Families, including the ones who'd known her as the Empress Janice, into believing that she was simply Daria.

They don't want to look, he realised, and shivered. They believed, firmly, in their own prejudices and someone who came from the Freebooters could never be taken seriously. They missed the fact that Daria, a woman in a man's world, had built up a cadre of loyal Freebooters who would do anything for her, having survived and prospered in the most brutal of environments. They might whisper insults behind her back, they might underestimate her — after all, she was *only* a commoner as far as they knew — but they wouldn't take her seriously. They wouldn't realise the truth until it was too late to save them.

She's going to be in the most powerful position of all, he thought, grimly. *If she succeeds in her plan, she's not just going to be Empress again, she's going to be the supreme ruler of the Empire, the most powerful person in history. She could not only avenge such insults, but ensure that her own people rise to power… and I'm committed to helping her!*

The thought was a bitter realisation. He'd found himself supporting her because his father had set matters up on the assumption that he would still be alive when the Empress finally returned, but now he was committed. Even if he went directly to Colin and confessed everything, it would mean the end for the Thousand Families. Colin would have no choice, but to strike as ruthlessly and decisively as possible and he would wipe out the entire structure. Tiberius had been carefully manoeuvring to keep as much as possible, but now… now, Colin would have all the excuse he needed to obliterate the Thousand Families. Daria had entrapped him as surely as if she'd tied him to her throne and forced him to play her game, knowing that he couldn't even run.

"I hope you're right," he said, neutrally, feeling his senses reeling. He found himself looking at her in a whole new way, seeing past the face to the personality underneath, hungry for power and determined to take the Empire for herself. Perhaps, just perhaps, he could unseat her afterwards… or maybe she would strike first, once he was no

further use to her. “The wedding is in two weeks, so don’t you think that you should make preparations to strike?”

“All in good time,” Daria said, calmly. She leaned forward, her long red hair falling down onto her breasts. It would have been almost seductive, but Tiberius could see the cold-hearted manipulation behind the motion. Somehow, he was sure that she might be willing to seduce him, or anyone else, but it would mean nothing to her. The normal human weaknesses had been burned out of her long ago. His father and his allies had created a monster. “I imagine that Pompey will be handling the security arrangements?”

“Unless Colin and his men insist on taking the lead,” Tiberius said. It wasn’t uncommon, when senior Family Members were involved, for their security staff to insist on taking point… and Colin certainly ranked higher than most of the Families, these days. “Would that be a problem?”

“Oh, perhaps,” Daria said, as if it was barely important enough to matter. She tossed her hair back and stood up in one smooth motion. She wore the standard Freebooter outfit, a tight-fitting shipsuit, as if it were a military uniform. It was strange, he realised numbly, that he hadn’t seen that before. “I’ll get in touch with you in a week’s time to arrange for the wedding surprise.”

He watched her leaving the room and scowled. She might just intend to blow up the entire wedding hall with all the guests, including him. It was hard to see how such an act would benefit her, but he’d learned not to underestimate her before… and she had her own agenda. The only guarantee he had was that he was still useful to her… and *that* wasn’t a sure-fire guarantee of anything. It would be easy to inform Colin of the truth, but that would mean certain destruction.

Bitch, he thought.

“Hey, are you finished with her?”

Tiberius looked up to see Gwendolyn. For a woman who was over seventy years old, old enough to remember Daria as the Empress Janice, Gwendolyn seemed to take a private amusement in posing as a sixteen-year-old, an act that fooled almost everyone. Tiberius had known better than to trust her completely — it was no secret that she thought she would make a much better Cicero than him — but it had still been a shock to discover that she had maintained links to the Empress for years.

“I suppose,” he said, reflecting on the double or triple meaning. Gwendolyn was yet another reminder of the dangers of opposing Daria. She could remove him and ensure that Gwendolyn became the Clan Head. “What do you want?”

“Charming as ever,” Gwendolyn said, taking Daria’s vacated seat

and sitting in the perfect position to show off her legs. If Tiberius hadn't known that they had come straight from the most fashionable cosmetic shop in the High City, he might have been impressed. As it was, the display was a little childish. "I was wondering if you knew what had happened to Carola?"

It took Tiberius a moment to place the name. "As far as I know, she's in a detention centre," he said, finally. Colin had sent her there after the news of Cottbus had finally arrived. It wasn't something Tiberius could fault, even if the crisis provided some grounds for their own operations. "Why do you care?"

"Oh, I don't," Gwendolyn said. She crossed her long legs and smiled at him. "I merely wanted to talk with her again before she left the planet. She is truly a fascinating woman."

"Well, go show Colin your body and ask him," Tiberius snapped, angrily. She didn't even flinch at his anger. "Go away. I'm busy."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I wonder if this is how Percival felt, Colin thought, leaning back in his chair and staring up at the starchart. *Sitting here, doing nothing and waiting for the hammer to fall.*

The thought made him smile bitterly. He'd issued orders, the best orders he could under the circumstances, and now he had to sit back and wait while others carried them out — or died trying. It wasn't something that sat well with him. He'd always led the Shadow Fleet into battle, into the firestorms of Harmony, First and Second Morrison and Earth itself, and now that he was too important to be risked, he had to remain on Earth while his friends and subordinates fought the battles without him.

He studied the starchart and tossed possibilities around in his mind. By now, he was sure, Admiral Wilhelm would have attacked Hawthorn and probably taken the planet, unless he'd committed a tiny force to it and Admiral Garland had slapped him back out of his complacency. Colin suspected that the planet had fallen, but he wouldn't *know* until the message finally arrived through what remained of the ICN, or a destroyer playing messenger boy. Katy intended, or so she claimed, to raid Admiral Wilhelm's forward bases, but what if she'd been mouse-trapped and destroyed at Hawthorn? There was no way to know until the messages arrived to update him, by which point they would be dramatically out of date themselves.

You can't run a war at long distance, he reminded himself, and scowled. The Empire had tried that when he'd launched the rebellion and it had failed. If they hadn't overridden Joshua from time to time, the rebellion might have failed instead, but they'd chosen to assume that they knew better than the person on the spot. Colin wouldn't make that mistake himself, but now all he could do was wait, rather than issuing useless orders. It was on the tip of his fingers to start contacting the various departments and hurrying them along, rather than trusting them to know their jobs and leaving them to get on with them, even though he *knew* it would be futile. By his most pessimistic estimate, Admiral Wilhelm could be halfway to Earth, but the first Colin would know of it would be when the first starships started flickering in to commence the attack.

He ran his hand through his hair, feeling tired and old. He was barely forty years old, but he had changed the Empire… and had found himself left with the task of reforming it, rather than leaving it in the hands of Parliament. The MPs just kept arguing and arguing, rather than coming to any decisions and sticking with them, while the first-rank and second-rank worlds increasingly went their own way.

He could dispatch a fleet of ships to bring some of them back into the fold, but that would mean destroying everything he had worked to create. There were times when he seriously considered just taking a starship and vanishing for the Rim, but only the thought of the hundreds of thousands who had followed him kept him in his place. He couldn't leave them exposed to the reactionaries, not after everything they'd done for him…

Perhaps I should tour the orbital defences, he thought, and considered it for a long moment, before finally dismissing the thought. The defences of Earth, with a little help from the Geeks, were stronger than they had ever been, perhaps even strong enough to challenge Admiral Wilhelm without mobile support. Earth's solar system, however, was a complex place to defend, if not to attack. Colin had taken Earth himself — it felt like years ago, years since he had trapped himself in a thankless task — and if sheer destruction was the aim, Admiral Wilhelm could do much worse. If Colin had a year, time to bring new starships online and refit old ones, the war could be ended fairly quickly, but he doubted that he would be allowed such time. After all, Admiral Wilhelm, unlike Percival, could read a production chart.

It was almost a relief when his secretary buzzed him. "Mr President" — Colin's official title was President and Leader of the Provisional Government, something that felt odd in the Empire — "Lady Tyler and Captain Cordova are here to see you."

"Thank you," Colin said, hearing Kathy telling his secretary that she was no longer a Lady. "Please send them both in at once."

He stood up as they entered, watching them carefully. They both looked dead tired, almost as if they were asleep on their feet, but Kathy looked determined while Cordova looked oddly subdued. Colin hadn't arranged for himself to have a large office, but he'd installed a pair of sofas for close friends and waved them both over to one of them, offering them both a drink. Cordova accepted, quicker than normal, while Kathy declined. They exchanged small talk for a few minutes, leaving Colin puzzled and worried. It had to be bad news, but for once neither of them seemed willing to speak first.

"I'd love to chat about old times for hours," he said finally, "but I don't have the time these days." It was easy to envy Cordova, at least, whose main role was overseeing the Volunteer Fleet — what was left of it — and the system's defences. "Can I ask you why you decided to come visit me at such short notice?"

"We didn't want to raise any flags," Kathy explained, seemingly taking the lead. That was more than just unusual, it was peculiar. Normally, Cordova was completely irrepressible, happily wasting time chatting about girls he'd known once, or bragging about the qualities

of his crew. To be fair to him, the *Random Numbers* did have a remarkable crew, even though some of them had been glad to be back in the Imperial Navy again. “It was important that this meeting passed unnoticed.”

Colin lifted an eyebrow. “I’m intrigued,” he said, “but verbal fencing doesn’t interest me nearly as much as the physical kind. What do you both have to tell me?”

Kathy took a breath. “Tiberius is planning to have you killed and intends to have Jason do his dirty work,” she said, and started to outline the entire story. Colin listened, keeping his face blank through sheer force of will, as she explained that Jason Cordova had been born a Cicero and that, long ago, he’d spared an entire planet of Dathi from destruction. “I think that he intends to mount a coup.”

“I doubt that there’s any doubt about that,” Colin said absently, his mind racing as he grappled with the new information. He hadn’t thought much about Cordova’s loyalties since the Fall of Earth, deciding that if he was an Imperial Intelligence plant, he’d never been activated in time to save the Empire from the rebellion. His very inaction — and loyal service as part of the Shadow Fleet — had spoken in his favour. He hadn’t considered the possibility of a deeper game… and one played by one of the handful of Family Members he had come to trust. Everything Tiberius had done, since the Fall of Earth, took on new and sinister meaning. “I wonder…”

He focused in on Cordova, seeing, for the first time, the quiet desperation that hid behind the act. The Captain who’d led his ship to the Rim rather than commit genocide, always aware that he was vulnerable, and every man’s hand would be turned against him if the truth leaked out, dependent upon a Family he hated to conceal the truth. He’d been pompous, and pushy, and sometimes plainly crazy, just to hide his real self from the universe. He’d led his crew on a long voyage of the damned. There were legends of starships that had lost their flicker drives in interstellar space and forced to crawl slower-than-light to the nearest world, but Cordova’s ship had been lost forever. They had had no hope of returning home until the Empire was overthrown.

“You spared the Dathi,” he said, carefully. Colin had wondered, privately, if the Dathi threat had been manufactured. There might have been a war thousands of years ago, but no one had seen a living Dathi since then, not as far as he had known. The Empire had had every incentive to manufacture a threat — after all, they couldn’t *prove* that the race had been exterminated, and they had been spacefarers — and Colin had suspected that it *was* a manufactured threat. “What happened to them?”

“I looked it up after I returned to Earth,” Cordova said, vaguely.

There was something bitter and broken in his voice, a sense that there would never be any safety for him, or Kathy. “The world was destroyed, having first been catalogued as a human world, and then several asteroids were dropped on the wrecked world. There won’t be any trace of them left there now.”

Colin nodded. The Empire might have revealed the truth… if Cordova had obeyed orders and destroyed them from the start. Public Information would have had a field day, proclaiming Cordova the man who’d saved the Empire, never mind the fact that a non-technological planet was utterly harmless to anyone in the Empire. Instead, he’d left them with a poisoned chalice and a nightmarish blow to the very heart of their power. If the population had realised that one of the Thousand Families was prepared to *spare* the Dathi…

He directed his thoughts back to more immediate problems. “Personally, I don’t think that you did the wrong thing,” he said, addressing Cordova. It would have been hypocritical to accuse him of wrongdoing, after Colin had been working to free the other races held in bondage by the human race, but it was also the truth. A planet of aliens — any aliens — who were no threat to anyone but themselves didn’t deserve to be scorched. Hell, Gaul hadn’t deserved the attempted scorching either. “Politically, we won’t be able to make a big thing of it, but as far as I’m concerned you did the right thing.”

He leaned forward. “And what, exactly, did Tiberius make you do?”

“He sent two of his people to Harmony to meet with me,” Cordova said. He seemed to be regaining his confidence, perhaps realising that Colin wasn’t going to drop a hammer on him and ruin his life. Just telling someone — anyone — had to be a huge relief. “They made contact with me and gave me a piece of artwork to remind me of what I’d done — or rather, refused to do — and told me to wait for orders. I don’t think that they knew the truth. Anyone who has survived as the Cicero wouldn’t have shared *that* kind of information with just anyone, even his closest allies. They asked me, from time to time, for information, but nothing too significant.”

“Holding you in reserve,” Colin said, thoughtfully. It made a certain kind of sense. No one in their right mind would just throw an asset like Cordova away. “They must have been worried about you simply cutting your losses and vanishing.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Cordova said, flatly. “It was the crew of my ship. They were all involved in my decision and would have suffered for it. I couldn’t get them all to hide, even out on the Rim.”

“They’ll have a pardon,” Colin said, and meant it.

“Pardoned for what?” Kathy asked, sharply. She leaned forward, as if she could change reality by sheer force of will. “If they weren’t

guilty of anything, how could they be pardoned?"

Colin shrugged. "It might be important to explain that they haven't done anything wrong," he said, putting the matter to one side for the moment. The blunt truth was that the vast majority of the population *would* consider that they had done something wrong in not exterminating the entire planet and committing genocide. "Jason, Kathy, what do they want you to do now?"

"They want me to kill you," Cordova said, carefully. "They offered to allow me back into the Family if I killed you, perhaps with other rewards as well…"

"Charming," Colin said. Surprisingly, he felt almost happy. He had a real enemy to fight, even though he was slightly disappointed in Tiberius. The Cicero had been a valuable ally, or so he had thought. Combat on the ground, in the shadows, wasn't his forte, but now he knew about the threat. "And do you want to kill me?"

They exchanged glances. "No," Cordova said, finally. He stroked his beard thoughtfully. It was nearly a minute before he spoke again. "I want my crew pardoned, or officially forgiven, and nothing else."

"I want this conspiracy defeated," Kathy said, flatly. "They can't turn the clock back, no matter how they try." Her voice hardened. "Colin, this is a clear breach of the truce that ended the war, the agreement that preserved something of their power in exchange for them not bringing the Empire down around our heads. We can go after them openly now."

She reached over and took Cordova's hand. "They can't turn the clock back," she repeated. "We were having problems keeping the Empire stable despite everything, because of all their workers who wanted to be treated better, and who wanted power and promotion for themselves. We couldn't keep trying to square the circle forever, but now we don't have to try. They're a clear and present threat and can be removed, simply and quickly."

"Perhaps not," Colin said, grimly. She was right, in a sense; it *would* be easy to go after Tiberius and the remainder of the Cicero Family, but would it end there? Who else was involved in the conspiracy? Tiberius had kept an open house, as far as the remainder of the Thousand Families were concerned, even including some of the MPs. How many of them had been subverted and brought under his thumb? He might even have Household Troops under his control, despite the agreement to remove them all from Earth. How far did his influence really spread? "How many others do you know about as being directly involved?"

Cordova frowned. "Tiberius himself, Pompey and Gwendolyn," he said, finally. Colin swore. Three people… and even assuming that it *was* the entire Cicero Family, there was no *proof*… and dealing with

them as quickly as he would have liked would have destroyed the rule of law he was trying to build! The thought was maddening; the enemy skulked in the shadows, doing whatever they pleased, while Colin was bound by the laws he had signed into existence himself. “He implied that there were many others…”

“Of course,” Colin agreed, savagely. There were around two million people who could be reasonably counted as part of the Thousand Families. Some, such as Stacy Roosevelt, had vanished into space, their fates unknown. The remainder had stayed on Earth and either thrown themselves into the Provisional Government, or hid in their estates and tried to pretend that nothing had changed. The latter, in particular, would be happy to support Tiberius, even if he sought to make himself Emperor…

And yet there was the nagging sense that he was missing something important.

He pushed it to one side as he looked up at the starchart. “Do you think that they might be allied with Admiral Wilhelm? It might explain how his forces advanced so fast…”

Cordova considered it. “I doubt it, unless Admiral Wilhelm is merely someone’s puppet,” he said, after a moment. “He seems equally determined to bring down the Thousand Families, assuming we believe everything that Carola said to us… and we know she lied several times. She might well have lied about that as well, except I have a feeling that she was telling the truth. A man in his position would have to be a fool to miss the chance that fate — and we — offered him.”

“True,” Colin agreed. It might be time for another chat with Carola, although dealing with her was an irritating problem. Legally, her very status was vague, although there was a motion afoot in Parliament to declare her a rebel against the Provisional Government and treat her as such. Daria had proposed it, as he recalled, but the MPs were dragging their feet. If Admiral Wilhelm won the war, he would probably be out for revenge on anyone who hurt his wife. It didn’t say much about their confidence in the war effort, but a great deal about their sense of self-preservation. “Leave that for the moment.”

He looked down at his table for a long moment. “I’m going to have to bring Vincent and Neil in on this,” he said, thinking hard. His Head of Security and the Commander of the Marine Detachment couldn’t have gone bad, for the very simple reason that if either of them had, he had already lost without knowing that he was at war. “I need the pair of you to keep me informed if Tiberius contacts you and…”

He paused. A thought had just occurred to him. “I could send you

out of the system," he said, to Cordova. "You'd be out of his reach and…"

"I think he'd pressure me to stay where I was," Cordova admitted. "Besides, you don't have a good role for me away from here and that might tip him off to the truth. If he learns that I came to you, he'll step up his own plans and try to take you out…"

"He can't, unless he can counter the Shadow Fleet," Colin said, and wondered if that were actually true. He'd planned in terms of a fleet engagement, but if Tiberius smuggled a standard nuke into the High City, it would rather neatly decapitate the Provisional Government. Was Tiberius that ruthless? He would also take out several hundred lower-ranking Family Members. "I wonder…"

He broke off as his intercom buzzed. "Yes?"

"Mr President, we just had a flash signal from System Command," his secretary said, grimly. Colin knew it was bad news just from her voice. "There's been a shuttle accident. Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter is dead!"

Chapter Thirty

"Admiral, the freighter has just returned from Ysalt."

Admiral Katy Garland nodded once as the green icon popped into existence on the display. She'd sent the Freebooter ship into the system ahead of her fleet, just to provide an up-to-date reconnaissance report, and it seemed that her gamble had paid off. Admiral Wilhelm's forces might have been using Ysalt as a supply base, but they'd clearly decided that it wasn't worth the effort of providing it with a strong mobile component to enhance the fixed defences.

Unless they're lurking under cloak and it's a trap, she thought, rather sourly. She'd been caught out that way once before and this time she would be more careful, far more careful. Admiral Wilhelm had to know that she would be searching for vulnerable points in his defences, but would he know that she'd located one of his supply bases at Ysalt? How could he know, unless he knew that the freighter that had just flickered through the system — and the previous Freebooter ships that had paused in the system, hoping to sell their wares — were spying for her. If he knew that…

She shook her head and concentrated on the images flickering up in front of her. Ysalt had been heavily fortified back when the Empire had been expanding into the Cottbus Sector, but cold-blooded calculations had 'proven' that Ysalt was actually less useful as an fleet base than Cottbus. It actually possessed a small independent population, stubbornly refusing to commit themselves to the Empire, and forcing them to comply would have been pointless. They had had nothing that the Empire actually wanted and, as long as they stayed on the planet, they weren't even a bad example as far as the Empire was concerned. Their only real use had been to convince the Imperial Navy that Cottbus was a much better base for future operations.

And that logic had just been turned on its head. Ysalt was the closest world in the Cottbus Sector to Earth and a logical supply base. Starships, particularly superdreadnaughts, might be able to fire and recharge their energy weapons effectively indefinitely, but missiles had to be constructed at industrial nodes, forcing the Admiral to run supply convoys through his space and into hostile space controlled by the Provisional Government. The Shadow Fleet had used covert bases and hundreds of freighters, but according to the analysts, Admiral Wilhelm shouldn't have had enough freighters to supply his fleet. If it were to be operating in the direction of Earth, striking deep into the heart of the Empire, it would need a supply base. She doubted that Ysalt was the only one — no commander worth his salt would put all his eggs in one basket — but it made a convenient target.

“We’ll go with Plan Theta,” she decided, finally. The handful of starships in the system — the ones she could see, she reminded herself — wouldn’t be enough to deter her from launching the attack. They would probably choose to flicker out and run rather than be destroyed in a stand-up battle. “Helm, begin the countdown. We flicker out in five minutes.”

“Aye, aye, Admiral,” the helmsman said. A countdown timer appeared on the display as warnings echoed through the starship, warning the crew to brace themselves against flicker shock and nausea. No amount of bracing, in Katy’s view, would compensate for the effects of flicker shock, but the crew had to be warned. The handful of people who boasted of no ill effects after flickering through interstellar space tended to be liars, or deluded. “Flicker drive locked on coordinates and powering up.”

Katy leaned back in her chair and braced herself. The crew’s morale had skyrocketed after the brief violent encounter at Hawthorn, although she knew that they had barely dented Admiral Wilhelm’s war machine. He could suck up the loss of a handful of superdreadnaughts and keep going, although even he had his limits. The thought of just how many superdreadnaughts were going to be lost, on both sides, during the war chilled her. The Empire had never built enough, as far as the Imperial Navy was concerned, and replacements were slow in coming. The post-war Empire, whoever ended up running the government, was going to be very weak.

Perhaps that’s a good thing, she thought, as the final seconds ticked away. The Empire’s monopoly on superdreadnaughts and superdreadnaught construction had kept it firmly in power; none of the first-rank worlds could stand up to even one of the sector fleets, as Gaul had proven. If the Shadow Fleet hadn’t come to the rescue, Gaul would have been scorched… and it knew it. If the first-rank worlds started building superdreadnaughts as well, the entire basis of the Empire’s power might disintegrate. It would certainly be harder for anyone to throw their weight around.

“Flickering,” the helmsman said. The display blanked once as the starship flickered through interstellar space. At such range, barely a light year from the system, it was bare seconds before they flickered back into normal space. Katy braced herself, but the shock still stung, the cumulative effects of two shocks in close succession tearing at her. She winced, hearing the sound of someone vomiting on the deck, and pulled herself back together as the display started to fill up with new icons. “We have arrived in the system.”

“I had noticed,” Katy said, concentrating on the display. They’d drilled the battle stations drills long enough for her to be confident that the fleet would come to battle stations without her having to do

more than issue basic orders. The fleet's fire control system, years ahead of anything Admiral Wilhelm *should* have had, linked the fleet into a single weapon, under her command. The fleet should have been able to match two of Admiral Wilhelm's squadrons without breaking a sweat, although without knowing just how far the new weapons had spread, Katy wasn't inclined to run such risks. "Tactical?"

"Seventeen enemy starships detected, including four battlecruisers," the tactical officer reported, calmly. The display continued to update as more enemy starships brought their drives online, some trying to form into a combat formation while others, probably freighters, started to run towards the edge of the gravity shadow and escape. It looked, very much, as if they had been taken by surprise. She could only hope that her first impression was correct. "Two destroyers have just flickered out; vectors suggest that they are flying to Cottbus itself and Nova Berlin."

Admiral Wilhelm's headquarters and one of his industrial nodes, Katy thought, as the fleet shook itself down into attack formation. She watched as probes sped away from the ships, hunting for any turbulence that might mark the presence of cloaked starships, while studying the defences of the planet below. The display kept updating as the defences, older fortresses and automated platforms that would have been a threat before the rebellion, came online, linking into the unified command network and preparing for action.

"Locate the main supply base," she ordered, already knowing where it had to be. The tactical officer illuminated a series of old asteroids, once used as a source of metal and resources for the planet below, hanging in high orbit. They could have been spun up to generate gravity and converted into habitats, but instead they had been left drifting in space, which suggested that they were being used as supply dumps. The presence of modern missile systems defending them only convinced her that she was right. "Align our vector on them and prepare to engage."

"Aye, aye, Admiral," the helmsman said. The starship shivered slightly as the drive fields finally started to propel it through space. Katy watched, grimly, as the enemy fleet started to form up in front of them, knowing that a lot of good men and women were about to die for their master. They couldn't stop the superdreadnaughts from wrecking the entire system and they had to know it.

"Hail them," she said, quietly. She took no pleasure in mass slaughter of helpless men and women, even if they were on the wrong side. "Inform them that we will accept their surrender under the terms and conditions of the Moscow Accords."

The thought brought back memories of her own period as a prisoner of war. Admiral Wachter had treated her and the remainder

of the POWs well, against orders from the Thousand Families. She hadn't realised until after the Fall of Earth just what the Thousand Families had had in mind for her, but she'd been supremely grateful to Joshua for saving her people. They would have been given to the mind techs and, after having been made to betray the rebellion, would have been sold as pleasure slaves. She'd had nightmares for months afterwards.

"No response," the communications officer said. There was a long pause. "I am unable to even locate any ship-to-ship communications traffic."

"Lasers, then," Katy said, grimly. It wasn't uncommon for starships to rely solely on lasers to communicate, but in a war situation it was generally regarded as a sign of hostile intent. It had always baffled her that the Imperial Navy used such a system, when it was impossible to prove that starships were using lasers to communicate or were just being silent, but it was doctrine and therefore not to be questioned by mere mortals. Rewriting the Imperial Navy Regulations, massive volumes covering every problem the Imperial Navy had encountered or was likely to encounter, was going to take years. There were times when she thought that it would be easier to burn the volumes and start again. "Tactical, lock weapons on targets and prepare to open fire."

The enemy ships didn't wait. As soon as she slipped into firing range, they opened fire, belching out a pitiful salvo of barely two hundred missiles, locked on her ship. She tensed, wondering if they had located her flagship, before realising that it had to be coincidence. Their only hope was to inflict enough damage to put her off carrying out further raids. She watched as the red icons mounted, slipping into an attack profile that would give them their best chance at getting a handful of missiles through her defences, and winced. It wasn't going to work.

"Fire," she said, calmly.

The superdreadnaught shuddered as it belched out its first salvo. The firepower of the *Jefferson* alone outmatched the firepower of the entire enemy fleet… and it was combined with the firepower of eight other superdreadnaughts. She'd held the arsenal ships in reserve, expecting the enemy ships to target them first, but they'd chosen to focus on her superdreadnaughts. She wasn't sure if she admired their decision or not, but it made her angry. It was throwing away good men and women for nothing.

Idiots, she thought, wondering if it showed how Admiral Wilhelm's government really worked. If they were that scared to break contact and escape — and they'd had enough of an opportunity to escape when she'd first arrived — what would he do to them if they

lost the battle? It wouldn't matter to them personally — only a miracle would save them now — but how would Admiral Wilhelm treat surviving losers? Admiral Percival would have punished them for the cardinal sin of losing a battle, making his people reluctant to admit that they couldn't win… or willing to rebel.

The first wave of enemy missiles lanced into the teeth of her point defence and started to expire. The massed point defence of every superdreadnaught, and her escorts, could be deployed to protect her ships, with nothing whatsoever having to be held back to protect the remaining ships, which weren't under attack. She realised, as missile after missile flickered and vanished into a puff of ionised plasma and dust, that she'd overestimated their penetration aids. They were being wiped out and her ship wasn't even going to take a hit. The enemy were firing again, and again, but they weren't even combining their salvos… and she suspected that even if they had, they would have done no good. They simply didn't have the firepower to punch through her defences.

Her missiles roared into them and slammed home. Battlecruisers were tough, but they'd never been designed to stand up in the wall of battle, let alone stand off superdreadnaught-sized volleys of missiles. One by one, they exploded and died, barely having time to get even a handful of their crew off before they were destroyed. The cruisers and destroyers vanished just as quickly, their point defence trying desperately to save them from certain annihilation, only to fail. Explosions ripped through their formation and every successive death only made the next one more certain. Five minutes after they had opened fire, the last ship exploded and died.

"Opening hailing frequencies," Katy ordered, her voice coldly furious. At least a hundred thousand people had just died at her command and, as far as she was concerned, their deaths had been completely unnecessary. They shouldn't have had to die like that when they could have surrendered, rather than being committed to hopeless battle. She hoped, with a fury that surprised her, that their commanding officer was even now burning in hell. He had failed his crews spectacularly.

She waited for the communications officer's nod. "This is Admiral Garland, commanding 2nd Fleet," she said, coldly. She had considered embracing a different designation — Task Force Vengeance, perhaps — but it would only have confused people. That might not have been a bad thing, but they were close enough to the planet for the sensors to get an accurate read of each ship's unique drive field. "I have just engaged and destroyed your defence fleet and I intend to destroy the planetary defences and supplies.

"I am hereby ordering you to evacuate your defence platforms

and supply dumps now," she continued. "I will open fire in precisely ten minutes. Any attempt to engage my fleet or to transport supplies down to the planet will result in the deadline being cancelled and destruction commencing at once. I repeat, you have ten minutes to abandon the facilities before I destroy them."

She watched, coldly, as the fleet settled down into attack position. The arsenal ships with their long-range missiles could destroy the supply dumps without having to dive into the gravity shadow, making escape easy if the destroyers managed to summon reinforcements from another system. There was very little point in actually destroying the planetary defences — they were outdated and, these days, effectively useless — but she'd included them in her threat anyway. They could evacuate the entire orbit of the planet… if they started at once and used life pods. They shouldn't have had time to think about trying to save anything from the supply dumps, although she doubted that they would have time to save anything. It would take more time than she intended to give them, by quite a large margin, to transport everything down to the surface.

The timer ticked slowly down as the asteroids came alive with shuttles and life pods, even primitive skydiving pods that would normally be held in reserve for the direst of emergences. She'd heard that some people liked riding the pods for fun, plunging down into a planet's atmosphere in a fiery trail, but it seemed insane to her. There was quite enough risk in her life already.

"Zero," the tactical officer said. The stream of life pods and shuttles was slowly drying up. "Admiral…?"

"Signal the arsenal ships," Katy ordered. She didn't recognise her own voice. "They may fire when ready."

The arsenal ships had been running targeting scans all the time, locating the best places to target with minimal force. One of them belched a hail of missiles, firing down into the gravity shadow, right towards the asteroids. She had expected the defenders to leave their point defence on automatic and it wasn't a surprise when the asteroids' point defence started to engage the missiles, but there wasn't enough fire to put more than a dent in the missile swarm. She'd wondered if they had gone to the expense of fitting the asteroids with force shields beyond the standard counter-radiation shields, but it seemed that they hadn't. The sheer number of generators required to cover such large asteroids would have daunted almost anyone.

She smiled as the first missiles struck home and the asteroids started to disintegrate under the pounding. They might not have been spinning, which would have sped the entire process of disintegration up, but they hadn't been designed to contain the effects of nuclear blasts, even without secondary explosions among the stores. One by

one, they blew apart into a wave of rocky debris, most of it falling down towards the planet below. She keyed her console and checked, quickly, but allowed herself a sigh of relief when it became clear that there wasn't going to be anything large enough to survive the passage through the atmosphere and wreck destruction on the surface.

"Mission accomplished," the tactical officer said.

"Good," Katy said. She smiled at the icons representing the useless orbital defences. Their crews, either down on the planet, floating in orbit, or even remaining at their posts, had to be going mad with frustration. "Helm, take us out of her."

An alarm sounded as new icons flickered into existence. "Admiral, we have a single superdreadnaught squadron," the tactical officer said, grimly. "Should we engage?"

Katy shook her head. It was tempting… and they should have had the advantage, but it was too risky. She had to keep her fleet intact. It was the only consideration she would allow herself.

"No," she said, finally. If nothing else, they'd definitely burned Admiral Wilhelm's beard. There was no point in risking heavy losses, not now. "Helm, take us out of here."

The stars vanished as the fleet dropped back into flicker space, leaving the destroyed supply dump behind. She smiled as soon as the fleet stood down from battle stations. After that raid, morale would be going through the roof… and Admiral Wilhelm would have to reconsider his plans.

We might even have stopped him from advancing, she thought, and smiled again.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lieutenant Oliver Zulu looked down at his console and sighed. Another few million kilometres of nothing. Absolute nothing. Wakanda might have been one of the first-rank worlds, but it wasn't a particularly important first-rank world. Indeed, it was whispered by the lower-ranking officers that the only reason the Empire hadn't abandoned their normal procedure of quietly screwing as much as they could out of the first-rank worlds and just grabbing Wakanda was because they had plenty of corrupt officials of their own and didn't need more. There were times when Zulu, who had risen as far as he ever would in the Wakanda Space Navy, would have liked to join the Shadow Fleet, just to escape the ever-present corruption that surrounded the Navy.

He scowled down at the display and scowled. It said something about the highly-dubious 'success' of Wakanda that the system had the lowest number of spacecraft of any first-rank world, let alone a tiny and largely primitive defence force, including ships that dated back to the days of the Dathi War. The planners kept telling everyone that fame, riches and successes were just around the corner, but hardly anyone believed them any more. If their plan had been to make Wakanda unattractive as a world to pillage, and therefore defend against the Empire, it had been a stunning success. It had also drained the spirit of Wakanda and ensured that it had the highest emigration rate of any first-rank world. They preferred to live under the Empire than their own people.

And some of them just couldn't wait for Admiral Wilhelm. Only brutal repression and lack of forward planning had prevented a coup from carrying off the government and replacing it with something that would have been, by any standard, far better for the people. Some of the junior officers hoped that the Shadow Fleet would come and liberate Wakanda from its own government, others, older and wiser, knew that it wouldn't happen. Wakanda, like all the other first-rank worlds, had autonomy. It was hard to think of a single world that had abused the status more than poor Wakanda, home of some of the poorest humans in the universe. It didn't help that the government and its lackeys lived in a style that outshone even the vast depravities of the Thousand Families.

"Eyes on your screen," the commodore snapped, catching Zulu's eye. He was a big boor of a man, who boasted of his service in the Imperial Navy before returning to Wakanda, claiming to have commanded superdreadnaughts and participated in hundreds of engagements with rebel forces. Zulu privately suspected that the truth

was that he hadn't commanded anything more advanced than a garbage scow. He certainly seemed to have no idea of the capabilities and limitations of the men under his command. "We want to know the minute anything enters the system!"

Sure we do, Zulu thought, trying to convince himself that the commodore was merely being bombastic. The advance of Admiral Wilhelm and the fall of the Imperial Navy base at Hawthorn had caused the government to panic, all-too-aware that their own people would prefer Admiral Wilhelm to their rule. They'd put the Space Navy on alert and tried desperately to build up the defences, only to run into funding problems at once. Wakanda was not regarded as a good credit risk and richer worlds, intent on improving their own defences, had little to spare. They didn't even have sensors capable of tracking ships in the outer solar system. If Admiral Wilhelm's forces flickered in only a few AU away, they would be completely missed until they opened fire. Zulu's awareness of what was around the orbital defence fort was almost completely non-existent.

"And the rest of you, look lively," the commodore continued. Zulu sighed as the berating continued. He'd served under a handful of officers who had been sadists and tyrants, but at least they'd known what they were doing. The commodore's only qualification for his post had been that he was a relative of the current head of government, the United Clan. "I don't want to see even one of you slacking off…"

Zulu tuned it off and entertained himself with a mild fantasy of rolling a fragmentation grenade into the commodore's quarters one night. He hadn't ever attempted to turn fantasy into reality — if he was caught, his entire family would suffer — but it kept him warm at night. besides, the commodore believed that a man should be known by the scale of his appetites and was therefore awesomely fat, causing some of his subordinates to take bets on when he would pass away from a heart attack. It said something about his general indolence that he hadn't even bothered to use cosmetic surgery to reform his body, although he was always bragging about his enhanced penis, something that was well outside Zulu's funds. If the Wakanda Space Navy had allowed women to serve the commodore would have been unstoppable…

He snapped back to attention as an alarm sounded, calling everyone to attend. "I have a contact," he said, pushing as much excitement into his voice as he could. So few craft visited the system that he barely had time to run proper tracking exercises on them all. The only regular arrivals were a bare of dingy freighters belonging to the government that seemed rather less space-worthy than something from the early days of space travel. "One starship, flickering out above

the gravity shadow."

The commodore waddled over to his station. "I see," he said, his breath stinking of something Zulu would prefer not to think about. When the remainder of the crew struggled to live on rations, packed by government-owned factories and tasting of very little, if they were lucky, the commodore had the services of a private chef and as much food as he could stomach. "Hostile?"

"Unknown, sir," Zulu said, carefully not allowing any scorn into his voice. The commodore had a long memory for slights and insults from those he considered his inferiors. "I think it's a destroyer, but it's hard to tell with these sensors and they could be jamming us…"

"Or maybe you're just incompetent," the commodore sneered. His eyes fell on the red icon as it twisted and vanished in a flicker of light. "Have they gone?"

"Yes, sir," Zulu said. He pushed as much concern into his voice as he dared. "I think that was a reconnaissance flight, sir. We have to put the defences on alert."

"Oh, really?" The commodore asked. His voice didn't bother to hide anything. "Do you think, a person who has never served off-world, that Admiral Wilhelm would not take one look at our defences and choose to leave us alone?"

It would be more likely that he would die laughing and his successor would order the attack, Zulu thought. Whatever the commodore, and his family, thought about the defences, Zulu himself had no such illusions. They wouldn't stand up to a concentrated attack from a pair of battlecruiser squadrons, let alone the might of Admiral Wilhelm's fleet. The government had tried to bury the warnings from the Provisional Government on Earth, but Zulu had seen enough to know just how little hope Wakanda actually had.

He was still trying to find a way to explain that to the commodore, without an automatic death sentence, when the alarms started to chime again. Seven massive starships had emerged outside the designated emergence zone, far too close to the planet for comfort. The sensors still couldn't pick up sufficient detail, but it was clear that they were superdreadnaughts. Nothing smaller could have produced such a signature. The display kept updating, revealing the presence of more starships spreading out to escort the larger capital ships, but Zulu didn't know why they were bothering. If they had bothered to read their copy of *Jane's Fighting Starships*, they would know just how weak the defences actually were. Seven superdreadnaughts — let alone the two additional superdreadnaughts that appeared a moment later — were overkill.

"We have multiple emergences," he said, calmly. Part of him was proud by how calm his voice was, in contrast to the Commodore, who

had gone so pale that Zulu wondered if he were about to collapse, while the remainder of him saw certain death in the very near future. Wakanda's never-to-be-sufficiently-damned government wouldn't see sense and surrender at once. "I am reading approximately forty-two starships forming up on attack vectors."

The commodore seized on the key word. "Approximately?" He demanded. Zulu wondered why he was even bothering to pretend to be surprised. The commodore's real knowledge of space warfare and technology was almost non-existent. "how do you not have an exact count?"

"Because they are using their ECM to spoof our sensors and I only have accurate tracks on forty-two of them," Zulu replied, patiently. "I count two minutes before they enter engagement range of the starships."

The Wakanda Space Navy was slowly assembling. The Cottbus Fleet could have charged right into the gravity shadow and engaged some of the ships at once, but instead they were waiting, lurking right on the edge of the shadow. It took Zulu only a second to understand why. If the defenders were kind enough to line up to be slaughtered, Admiral Wilhelm — if he were actually present — would be happy to accept the favour.

Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake, he thought, sourly. It was an Imperial Navy saying, one of the many trite sayings that passed for wisdom from time to time, but it had a core of solid truth. He looked up at the commodore and took in his pale and shaking face. There would be no inspiring leadership from a man whose only normal decisions involved eating and sleeping. He was utterly unsuited to his role.

"Sir," he said, more gently than he would have believed possible, "you have to warn them?"

The commodore's piggish eyes glared at him. "Warn them of what?"

"They're lining up to be slaughtered," Zulu said, and explained as best as he could. If the vectors kept merging, the Wakanda Space Navy would find itself unable even to escape the trap they'd walked into with their eyes wide open. They literally wouldn't even have a chance to fire back at their enemies. "Sir…"

"My uncle is in command of the fleet," the commodore said, dismissively. Somehow, questioning him had brought back part of his old personality. Zulu hadn't missed it. "I'm sure that he understands the situation far better than a lowly sensor tech. Tend to your knitting and leave the brave decisions to others."

Zulu rolled his eyes. "We're picking up a signal on general channels," a communications tech said, before the discussions could

get any worse. “It’s coming up automatically.”

Admiral Wilhelm’s face appeared in front of them. “This is Admiral Wilhelm, commanding the Cottbus Sector fleet,” he said, calmly. Zulu could just hear the competence dripping from his voice and knew that his commanders were no match for the man, even if they’d had equal levels of technology and starships. “By the power vested in me, and my fleet, I declare this system to be part of the Cottbus Union, with all the rights and responsibilities that that implies. Stand down your starships and defences and prepare to be boarded. Any resistance will be met with deadly force.”

He paused. “There will be no further warnings,” he concluded. “Any attempt to engage my fleet will result in the destruction of your forces and the imposition of punishment taxes and other retribution.”

His image vanished from the display. “This is the Clan Head,” a voice said, without a display. Zulu, who’d had a small side bet going with himself that the government would be trying to flee the planet just about now, was mildly impressed, although he suspected that the truth was that they hadn’t even bothered to plan out an emergency escape for their own people. “In the name of Wakanda, I reject your claim to authority. Any further attempt to impose your authority on us will be met with deadly force and soundly defeated…”

Zulu covered his head with his hands as the Clan Head went on, and on. It was a bluff. He knew it was a bluff. Worse, Admiral Wilhelm would know that it was a bluff. Worst of all, the people bluffing *didn’t* know that it was a bluff. They truly believed the crap that the Wakanda Space Navy spewed out to justify its existence, when a few investments and a slight lack of corruption would have paid much greater dividends. They might believe that it was only the Space Navy that had kept Wakanda from being attacked by pirates, or even the might of the Imperial Navy itself, but Zulu knew better. Wakanda simply had nothing worth the effort of taking it.

His display chimed. Admiral Wilhelm had gotten tired of listening to the Clan Head’s empty posturing and had issued orders to his fleet. As Zulu watched helplessly, one by one, the superdreadnaughts slipped into the gravity shadow, on a direct course for the Wakanda Space Navy and the other defenders. They were coming on faster than he had seen any ship entering a gravity shadow before and it would be bare seconds before they engaged…

“Now we’re going to see something,” the commodore said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “My uncle will kick them back out of the system.”

Zulu had the nasty feeling that he was half-right. They *were* going to see something.

“They’re locking missiles onto the Space Navy,” he reported, as

calmly as he could. The enemy ships weren't even bothering to hide or conceal their own emissions. They had locked on and were preparing to fire. His display sounded another alarm and he winced. "They're opening fire."

The Wakanda Space Navy had never invested seriously in missile production, with the effect that they had missiles that dated back several hundred years, without any of the more modern penetration aids. Admiral Wilhelm, by contrast, had hundreds of modern missiles and he wasn't shy about using them. Before the Wakanda Space Navy had even managed to launch a single salvo, two of the superdreadnaughts — just two — had unleashed hell towards their opponents. Their missiles were unimaginably fast, equipped with the latest sensors and targeting systems… and the contrast was hopelessly unbalanced. The Wakanda Space Navy just didn't stand a chance.

They fired, their missiles plodding towards their targets… and then the enemy missiles roared into their formation. The *Black Panther*, a battleship that dated all the way back to the foundation of the Empire and the fleet's flagship, was targeted by twenty missiles, but ten would have been more than sufficient. The battleship blew apart into a burning fireball, lost with all hands. They hadn't even had a chance to launch any life pods and escape the doomed ship.

Zulu couldn't take his eyes off the display. A pair of cruisers that comprised Wakanda's only modern ships — although with a definition of 'modern' that would have surprised most purists — were wiped out almost simultaneously. A flight of gunboats, useless for anything, but the simplest boarding action, were picked off neatly with individual missiles. The point defence network, barely capable of operating under the best of conditions, shattered and the remaining ships were blown apart, one after the other. Ships that had been outdated years before the Geeks and Nerds started to upgrade rebel ships to outmatch Imperial Navy ships died, one by one, and no one escaped alive. His console wasn't showing even a single life pod.

"My God," he breathed. There were over two hundred thousand personnel in the Wakanda Space Navy and two thirds of them had been on the starships. They were all dead… and the engagement wasn't even over. The enemy ships were pushing through the debris, such as it was after the fearsome exchange of fire, and advancing on the orbital defences. Zulu knew, with a kind of numb disbelief, that they would have absolutely no trouble with the handful of orbiting fortresses, including his own. "We're all dead."

He looked around for the commodore. He was sitting on the floor, staring at nothing, a faint smell drifting up to touch Zulu's nostrils. He'd just seen his uncle die, Zulu remembered, and watched the world turned upside down. It would have been easy to feel sorry for him, but

Zulu remembered the way he'd treated his subordinates and no longer cared. He looked over at the communications officer and winced.

"Contact them," he ordered. He no longer needed to care about the commodore. It was almost worth the possibility of imminent death. "Tell Admiral Wilhelm that we surrender."

There was a long pause. "I'm picking up nothing from the incoming fleet," the communications officer said. His voice twisted sharply as another voice, screaming something, rose up and then faded. "The Clan Head is screaming at us to pluck up our nerve and fight."

"Ignore him," Zulu ordered, savagely. He mentally traced out a firing pattern for the city of T'Challa. It would have been easy to destroy it, so easy, and Wakanda would be free of its government. Why could they not have done it before? "Repeat the signal…"

An alarm sounded. Admiral Wilhelm's ships were locking their weapons on the station. They wouldn't have any problems destroying it. The shields were outdated and the point defence network was already broken without having fired a single shot.

"I don't think they're interested in surrender," the communications officer said. "I think…"

"No shit," someone said, from the rear of the bridge. Zulu heard the note of defeat, and yet of victory, and smiled. They had escaped the government and were free men, for the few seconds it would last. "Should we not fire back?"

Zulu shook his head. "Why bother?"

The superdreadnaughts opened fire.

A minute later, the final defenders of Wakanda died at their posts.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter's obituary took up nearly two pages of one of the more respectable — insofar that respectable could be used when there hadn't been a free press for more than nine months in the Empire — newssheets, and various pages of the less respectable ones, which had turned from compiling the real lives of the Thousand Families to honour the death of a great man. His early service to the Empire was recounted in fulsome detail, his great achievements lauded to the skies, and his untimely death mourned in a hundred different ways. Hundreds of pages included personal tributes, including a touching one from Tiberius Cicero, Colin and even some of Joshua's bitterest political enemies. It would be easy to believe that an Emperor had died.

Penny looked up into Joshua's eyes as the small transport prepared to return to normal space. "The reports of your death, it seems, have been very much exaggerated," she said, dryly. She had been surprised when Daria had insisted that Joshua 'die' in a faked shuttle accident — with enough force-grown tissue from them both to make the accident very convincing — but it made a certain kind of sense. Joshua, no more than any other mortal, couldn't be in two places at once. "How does it feel to know that everyone believes that you are dead?"

Joshua shrugged, his eyes studying the barren bulkhead as if it was a distraction from more pressing matters. "It has much to recommend it," he said, solemnly. She would have bet a great deal that he was thinking about his past… and how he'd come to fake his own death, just to ensure that he was free to serve the Empress. "We could just go onwards, out to the Rim, and hide from the universe."

Penny stared at him. She'd served with Joshua, and under Joshua, ever since she had returned from Sector 117 to report on the growing rebellion… and the loss of Harmony to Colin's forces. Joshua was that rarity, an Imperial Navy Admiral with a genuine sense of honour and tactics, and she'd blossomed under his tutelage. They'd fought at Morrison together, the first Imperial Navy unit to give the rebels a bloody nose, before effectively betraying the Empire and preventing the mass slaughter of the Gauls. They'd somehow managed to come out of the entire rebellion as heroes, despite having fought on the wrong side, and Penny was surprised that Joshua had just given that up, even for the Empress. They had slipped all the way over the line to outright treason.

She couldn't say that she was really loyal to the Empire. She'd conceded, long ago, that if Colin had invited her to join his

conspiracy, she would have accepted and attempted to knife Percival in the back. It wouldn't have bothered her. Whatever loyalty she'd had before she'd been invited to join his personal staff — with some very personal duties — had faded away in long unpleasant nights and planning sessions where her advice was frequently ignored. The only thing that had kept her in service after her return to Earth had been Joshua… and his undoubted loyalty to the Empire, if not the Thousand Families. If Joshua had made himself Emperor, she would have followed him gladly, but instead…

Her gaze switched to the viewport. It was blanked out, preventing them from staring out into flicker-space, which was normally deeply disturbing to the human mind. Most people saw nothing, not even lights or strange energies, but there was nevertheless a very real sense of… *something* lurking out beyond the horizon. Human imagination had filled the weird dimension with ghouls and monsters, creatures that ate entire starships for dinner, but no one had ever proved their existence. It was just one of the tales spacers told when they were all alone in the dark.

She looked back at Joshua. "Do you want to leave?"

Joshua sighed. "I want to keep the Empire strong and stable and we need her to do that," he said, finally. She knew who he meant. "We need to keep the Imperial Navy strong and we need to prevent the first-rank worlds from gaining the power to tear the Empire apart. We even need to stop Admiral Wilhelm before he takes Earth and burns out the core of the Empire."

Penny frowned. She had wondered, in her darkest thoughts, if Daria was pulling Admiral Wilhelm's strings as well. A war situation could be exploited with ease by anyone ruthless enough to do so, and Daria certainly didn't lack for either courage or cunning. It was how she had survived so long. Penny remembered discussing the mysterious Daria, back when she had worked for Percival, but none of them had gotten near the truth. As far as they knew, the Empress had died somewhere in the vastness of interstellar space, even if no one had ever discovered a body.

She leaned forward. "Do you think that Admiral Wilhelm is working for her?"

"I doubt it," Joshua said, after a moment. He sounded as if he had been distracted from some greater thought. "I knew him when he was a mere Commodore. I'm surprised that the Hohenzollern Clan decided to have him promoted. He always was an ambitious little bastard, with a wife who was as good as scheming as anyone else I have ever met. Sending her to Earth was a stroke of genius, on so many levels."

He shook his head. "Why should he cooperate with her when he could claim the prize for himself?"

“I see,” Penny said. She didn’t understand all of the role Daria had assigned to Joshua — she had the oddest feeling that she was merely placing pieces in position for later use — but she could guess at the eventual plan. Joshua’s competence as a fleet commander was not in doubt. If Daria had been telling the truth, she even had a fleet for him to command. “What happens if he wins?”

“The Empire falls apart,” Joshua said, flatly. He gave her a tight bitter smile. “That cannot be allowed.”

The transport’s lights flickered once, warning them to brace themselves, before it returned to normal space. The display cleared and revealed a starscrape, with stars blazing endlessly in the darkness of space. When Penny had been younger, she’d been surprised to discover that stars didn’t twinkle in space, but the effect was caused by the light filtering through the atmosphere before it reached the surface. The transport tilted slightly, compensating for its arrival vector, before altering course and heading towards a set of running lights, blazing out in the distance.

Penny leaned forward as the transport moved closer to the massive bulk. It took on shape and form slowly, illuminated only by running lights and the occasional twinkle of maintenance drones, but it was easy to make out the shape of a *General*-class superdreadnaught. No one would ever give the designer of the starship class an award for good design, not when the idea had been to design an intimating ship rather than one that was aesthetically pleasing, but it did have a certain haughty grandeur.

“Four squadrons,” Joshua said, his voice unreadable. “There are four squadrons of superdreadnaughts here, enough to tip the balance against Admiral Wilhelm, if they were deployed with the Imperial Navy.”

Penny looked back at him. He had keyed the terminal and brought up a near-space display, using the handful of tuned-down IFF beacons to locate the different starships, waiting patiently near a space station that someone — and it was easy to guess who — had established, years ago. The level of forward planning was astonishing, let alone the sheer brazen nerve in stealing so much from Home Fleet, although she could see how it had been done. Corruption was so epidemic in the Imperial Navy that Daria, who’d commanded Home Fleet before making herself Empress, could have stolen enough war material to outfit a much larger fleet. She remembered, bitterly, just how badly Admiral D’Ammassa had stripped the Morrison Sector Fleet, just to earn himself billions of credits, and shivered. Joshua’s appointment as the Imperial Navy’s supreme commander, his reward for serving the Empress, would lead to the eradication of corruption.

“Four squadrons and over a hundred smaller ships,” Joshua said,

thoughtfully. His voice had darkened significantly. “Where did they all come from?”

Penny knew part of the answer to that question. Four squadrons from Home Fleet had deserted during the final stages of the Battle of Earth, vanishing into flicker-space and ensuring a rebel victory. No one knew what had happened to them, until now. Daria’s command of Home Fleet had evidently had a far more lasting effect than Imperial Intelligence had ever understood… or did she command Imperial Intelligence as well? Just how far did her influence stretch?

“Perhaps she had them built at one of the many yards and quietly diverted,” Penny said, finally. It was the only explanation that made sense. There might be only three Type-I shipyards in the Empire, but there were hundreds of Type-II and Type-III shipyards, some of which even built starships for pirate crews, knowingly or otherwise. A creative accountant could hide the expenditure with ease. After all, the Empire rarely bothered to run more than a handful of audits, unless they wanted to ruin the shipyard in question. “Did she make the crews stay here with their ships?”

The transport slid towards the lead superdreadnaught, which read out as the *General Monck*, and docked neatly at once of the external hatches, rather than attempting to slip into the shuttlebay. Joshua stood up and adjusted his uniform, before opening the hatch and leading the way down to the transport’s airlock. When they stepped through the airlock, they were met by a full party of Household Troops standing at rest — and an old friend.

“Present arms,” Captain Anne Cotman said, as the Household Troops stood to attention. The motions, Penny noted, were different from more regular Marine performance, but it was clearly heartfelt. The presence of the Household Troops explained a great deal. They were only deployed on Imperial Navy starships under very rare circumstances. Joshua, as far as Penny knew, had been the only Admiral to have a brigade of Household Troops under his command for nearly a hundred years.

Joshua smiled as he saluted. “Permission to come onboard, Captain?”

“Granted,” Anne replied, as she returned his salute. She was wearing a uniform that Penny didn’t recognise at first, before finally placing it. A uniform of the Imperial Guard, outlawed for fifty years. Merely wearing it was a direct challenge to established authority. “We’ve been waiting for you, sir.”

She dismissed the Household Troops and led them through the superdreadnaught’s endlessly corridors, up to Officers Country. Penny used the time to inspect the superdreadnaught’s general condition and was pleased to see that it was as fresh and new as if it had just sailed

out of the shipyard… and the dull background thrumming of the drives was pleasantly muted. A louder, more unpleasant noise generally meant that something was on the verge of going spectacularly wrong. She spotted a handful of familiar faces from the Morrison Sector Fleet as they entered Officer Country, men and women who'd served under Joshua at Morrison and respected him, and smiled. No wonder Daria had been able to keep them here for so long. They trusted Joshua…

It dawned on her, suddenly, that unless Joshua had known about the plot for far longer than seemed possible, Daria had been running a considerable risk. If Joshua hadn't been available to command her little fleet, what would have happened to the crew? They might have been convinced to follow someone else, although Penny couldn't think of anyone with the same degree of prestige and experience, or perhaps Daria had had a more final solution in mind. It was something to remember at the back of her thoughts.

"It's good to see you again, Anne," Joshua said, as soon as the hatch hissed closed. The Commander of a superdreadnaught was given almost palatial quarters, although Penny was pleased to see that Anne hadn't filled hers with souvenirs and knickknacks. Percival's quarters had been a tribute to his wealth and complete lack of anything reassembling taste, while Joshua had preferred nothing beyond a standard wall for his medals and awards. "How did you end up here?"

"The senior crews who served at Morrison were scattered after the end of the war," Anne said, as she poured them tea and handed Joshua a china cup. Penny accepted one herself and sipped it gratefully. "I was offered a cruiser command, but then I was approached by your representative and asked if I would like to continue to serve you…"

"Yes, my representative," Joshua said, calmly. Penny, who knew him better than most, caught the ice hidden behind his words. Joshua was annoyed… and amused. "Tell me about the status of these ships, then."

Anne smiled as she sipped her own tea. "There's not much to tell," she said. She paused, thoughtfully, before continuing. "We had the original crews of these ships and several hundred engineers from the Jupiter Yards, so we started refitting them as we did at Morrison, back before the end of the war. It wasn't an easy process, but to be fair to Admiral Porter, he did make some inroads on the most urgent problems."

"There are superdreadnaughts being refitted at Jupiter that should have fought in the battle for Earth," Joshua rumbled, before taking another sip of his tea. Penny, who'd heard his frequent rants on the subject hundreds of times, nodded in agreement. After the

Empress Janice — after *Daria* — Home Fleet had been run down. It had cost the Empire dearly. “If they had been in any condition to fight without a refit — indeed, practically a rebuild — the battle might have gone the other way.”

“Yes, sir,” Anne agreed. “The first few months were pretty manic, but we finally managed to complete the refit and modernisation scheme for these ships. I can fairly say that they should be a match for anything in the Shadow Fleet, with the possible exception of the *Independence*-class ships, and have the latest weapons. Of course, there is absolutely no chance of our base being discovered out here, even only two light years from Earth.”

And bare seconds from the planet at FTL speeds, Penny thought. Anne was right, of course. Even the most sensitive sensor network wouldn’t be able to detect the base, until any emissions reached passive sensors orbiting at the edge of the Solar System, and that would be at least a year off, assuming that they weren’t lost in the background roar of the universe. One way or another, the struggle for the future of the Empire would be decided by then. The tri-cornered war would have been resolved.

“Excellent,” Joshua said, as she finished. He wasn’t a man for praise. Penny knew that he only praised people who *had* done an excellent job. “You have done very well indeed.”

Anne glowed with pleasure. “Thank you, sir,” she said. She smiled brightly enough to make Penny smiled back at her. “Can I ask when we move?”

Joshua lifted an eyebrow. “What did my representative tell you?”

“That when you arrived, we would be going on alert and on an hour’s notice to move,” Anne said. She hadn’t realised — yet — that Joshua had sent no representative. “Now that you’ve arrived, I would like time to run through drills so that you are familiar with your fleet and…”

Joshua held up a hand. “It’s quite all right,” he said, calmly. There were Admirals who would have bitten Anne’s head off and blighted her career for daring to show any trace of independent thinking. Joshua accepted it and welcomed it. His power and position were not at stake. In his Empire, Anne would already be a Commodore by now. “We should have enough time to run some exercises before we flicker out.”

Penny considered it as she finished her tea. It was easy to see what Daria was planning, now. Home Fleet — the Shadow Fleet — represented the core of Colin’s power, a level of firepower that was literally unbeatable by anything that his enemies on Earth could present. As long as he controlled Earth’s low orbitals, his position was effectively impregnable. His death might mean chaos, or it might

place someone else in his position, with every incentive to wipe the Earth clean. Joshua's fleet would do more than just give Daria some teeth. Properly used, under an experienced commander, it would counter the Shadow Fleet. The game was far from unwinnable.

The datapad in her hand accessed the starship's command network and automatically downloaded a complete status report. Anne wouldn't have tolerated any false reporting, not after she'd learned so much from Joshua, and she was relieved to know that it didn't look as if she had misrepresented the situation. The *General Monck* was in excellent shape, with all of its thousands of components showing up as green. They were completely ready for a fight. She skimmed the training schedule and had to smile. The crew might even be on the verge of being over-trained. Anne was doing an excellent job.

She looked up at Anne and wondered what was going through her head. She'd known Anne back at Morrison, back when she'd been Joshua's Flag Captain, but where did she think they were going? Did she think that Joshua intended to make himself Emperor, or did she know the truth? The confusion suited no one, but Daria herself… and the fleet had hundreds of her people onboard. Who knew how it would all play out?

"Thank you," Joshua said, finally. "Can you please show us to our cabins? Once we get settled in, I'll want a full tour of the starship and then a meeting with the fleet's Captains. We have much to discuss."

"Of course," Anne said. She leaned forward so that she could speak quietly. "We're all behind you, you know."

"Are you?" Joshua asked. "That's good to know."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Did he really die in that shuttle?"

It was the first time that Colin had been able to discuss the matter with Anderson privately since Kathy and Cordova had dropped their little bombshell. If Tiberius — and God knew who else — was keeping an eye on him, a meeting with his Head of Security — to say nothing of the man commanding his Marine close-protection detail — would send up red flags. The war situation was worsening, he didn't know for sure who he could trust, and one of his closest advisors had died in a freak shuttle accident.

"It is impossible to tell," Major Vincent Anderson admitted, from his seat. A tall man with faintly anonymous features, Anderson looked anything, but confident. The loss of Joshua Wachter would have been worrying under any circumstances, but combined with the news about Tiberius it was alarming. "There was actually very little left of the shuttle after the accident."

He verged into technical detail that would have confused someone without Imperial Navy experience. The shuttle's drive field had destabilised rapidly within seconds, shearing through the hull and ripping the craft to shreds, killing everyone onboard long before any alarm could be raised. It had still been in Earth's gravity field and the fluctuations, encouraged by the presence of Earth, had reduced the shuttle to fragments. If it had happened in orbit, the debris could have been recovered and analysed, but instead the pieces had fallen down towards the planet, burning up in the atmosphere. The little that investigators had found proved nothing.

General Neil Frandsen snorted. "We know that he boarded the shuttle," he said, flatly, lighting one of his trademark cigars. The brand had once been reserved for the exclusive use of the Thousand Families, but after the Fall of Earth it had become available to the general public, including Frandsen himself. He had confided in Colin that he actually found the cigars rather bland and tasteless, but he kept smoking them anyway, just to remind the Thousand Families who had won the war. "We also know that he didn't land anywhere else between leaving the spaceport and his final moments in the atmosphere. Does it not follow, then, that he is certainly dead?"

"I could give you a dozen possible ways to get him off that shuttle without being noticed, or to convince observers that he had boarded the shuttle, or even to use a cloned body to fake his death," Anderson said, equally flatly. The two men didn't get along very well. The Marine tended to think in terms of straight battles, while the Security Officer thought in terms of plots and counter-plots. "I cannot prove, to

my own satisfaction, that Grand Admiral Wachter died in that shuttle. I consider it quite possible that he may not have been on the shuttle at all."

Colin frowned. Conspiracy theories made his head hurt. "I see," he said, finally. "If he wasn't killed, then why was his death faked?"

"There are several possibilities," Anderson said, ticking them off on his fingers. "One, he wanted to leave your service and decided to do it in a manner that would leave few questions behind. He worked with his own people, including his loyalists from Morrison, and set up the faked death scene so that he could vanish."

"It would have killed the pilot himself, and Penny Quick," Colin said, dryly. "Or were their deaths faked too?"

"Second, the Admiral is required for something else that Tiberius has in mind and therefore has to drop out of the public view… and, just incidentally, out of the Grand Admiralship you created for him," Anderson said. "The death scene is set up and the Admiral leaves the system to do whatever Tiberius wants him to do."

Colin nodded. "And the third possibility?"

Anderson shrugged. "Third, Joshua Wachter was actually killed, by one of his enemies," he said, finally. "The man wasn't — isn't — actually short of enemies, from reactionaries down here to men and women who lost friends and relatives in the Battle of Morrison. It's even possible that Tiberius ordered him killed, for whatever reason made sense to him."

Frandsen smiled. "Why would Tiberius kill someone whose death would certainly draw unwanted attention?"

Anderson smiled. "He might have been loyal to Colin," he said, nodding in Colin's direction, "or alternatively refused to do whatever Tiberius wanted. I don't think that that's particularly likely, not after Tiberius was the person who recommended Joshua for Morrison, but it is a possibility. Frankly, sir, we don't have enough evidence to point the finger at anyone, not in this position. We are left with an unsolved mystery."

Colin stared down at the table thoughtfully. "Are you certain that it was murder?"

"We studied the shuttle's records carefully," Anderson said. "The drive should not have destabilised so badly without alarms going off everywhere; the craft certainly should not have been allowed to fly. There was no trace of any damage when it was inspected prior to use, nor is there any reason to suspect that the maintenance crews are lying. The only possibility is a deliberate piece of sabotage within the shuttle's computer core, done competently enough to pass an inspection, yet utterly lethal when triggered. The shuttle might have been prepared for years before it was finally turned into a murder

weapon."

"What a cheerful thought," Colin observed. He considered the thought for a long moment. A person who could sabotage one shuttle could do the same to others. "How many shuttles do we have on the planet?"

"Thousands," Anderson said. He frowned. "I've ordered a check of all of their computer cores, just in case, but my gut feeling is that Wachter's shuttle was specially prepared for its mission. The crews do run regular checks on their craft and discovering a killer program would have resulted in all of the shuttles being grounded until we had had a chance to inspect them all."

Frandsen thumped the table. "Enough of this," he said, angrily. "We know who was behind the murder, or the faked death, so what are we going to do about it?"

"We have no proof linking Tiberius to the Admiral's death," Anderson said, flatly. "We do not have grounds, under the new laws, to haul Tiberius in for questioning, even gentle questioning. We could ask him to make an attestation under a lie detector, but he would be quite within his rights to refuse, as indignantly as he liked."

"And that," Frandsen snapped, "would prove that he had something to hide."

Anderson sighed. "*Everyone* has something to hide," he said. "Anyone, even someone who is completely innocent of anything that could be called an offence, even under the Empire's harshest laws, would fear a lie detector test, or the use of truth drugs. Everything they knew would come pouring out of them; the secret shames, the truths they would die rather than confess, the dark truth about what they're really like, their sexual fantasies… everything and anything. No one will blame him for refusing to go through such a session. They will, instead, blame us for forcing him to submit."

He leaned forward. "And even if we do find proof, what then?"

"Stamp on it sharp," Frandsen said. "If he's guilty, can't we strip him of his power and position and dump him on some godforsaken penal world?"

"It's not that simple," Colin said, tiredly. He ran his hand through his brown hair. "We are attempting to build the rule of law here… and the law applies to everyone, even traitors — suspected traitors."

"You *know* he's a traitor," Frandsen pointed out. "You have all the proof you need to convince yourself. What more do you need?"

"Yes, I do," Colin agreed. "I know, but we have to convince the Empire that he is a traitor, rather than me merely stamping on someone who happened to disagree with me and creating a martyr. I could name seven MPs who will be quite happy to lambaste me for hammering Tiberius without a full confession, in triplicate, and others

who will add their weight to secession campaigns. The Empire could fall apart over this."

He shook his head. "Vincent, can't you get covert access to his estate?"

"Not easily," Anderson admitted. "The Thousand Families have always controlled their estates ruthlessly; it's not like the High City, where we have domination and overall control. I couldn't slip someone into his staff without them going through personality conditioning, which would render them useless, and I would have great problems breaking through their counter-surveillance techniques."

He paused. "But this may not be the first murder that Tiberius has ordered, if indeed it was a murder," he continued. "Lord Roosevelt was murdered by his own pleasure slave, one sold to him by" — he paused for dramatic effect — "Tiberius."

Colin scowled. He disliked the entire concept of pleasure slaves — and forced personality reconditioning, for that matter — and had signed a number of laws into existence banning the former and placing the latter under strict supervision, but it hadn't prevented the practice from continuing. There was little that could be done for the existing pleasure slaves — they couldn't be re-educated or even freed from their condition — while anyone with any degree of paranoia, which suited the Thousand Families perfectly, would only want conditioned servants. It was possible to prevent conditioning from having an impact on a subject, but any halfway competent medical doctor would be able to tell that the conditioning had failed, giving rise to all kinds of questions.

"I see," he said. "How many more of them are there on Earth?"

"Several thousand," Anderson said. "They're not even regarded as human, so there isn't a precise count, but the High City alone has over nine hundred working within the city, mainly pleasuring visitors."

Colin shuddered. The concept was revolting. One might as well bed down with an animal, or commit incest with a blood relative. The pleasure slaves might look human — they tended to maintain an innocent demeanour that could be both haunting and stunningly attractive — but they were little more than children, mentally. They would remain at the apparent age of twenty for thirty years, then age and die rapidly, unless they were put to sleep first. It wasn't murder, according to the Empire. They weren't human.

"Disgusting," he said, shaking his head. If Tiberius had a means of controlling them at a distance, he might even have an entire army right under Colin's nose, one that would never be suspected until it was far too late. No one took pleasure slaves seriously. "Keep them out of Parliament and anywhere else that might be dangerous."

“Already done,” Anderson said, with a wink. “The remainder of the Thousand Families were not happy to learn about Lord Roosevelt’s death.”

“I’m sure,” Colin said. He laughed briefly. Tiberius had probably done the Roosevelt Clan a big favour, although the handful of survivors probably cursed his name with every breath they took. “We still have no direct proof, which leaves us with a problem.”

He picked up the gold-covered envelope on the desk and opened it. “You are cordially invited to the wedding of Tiberius Cicero, Head of Clan Cicero, and Alicia Russell, of the Russell Family,” he said, dryly. He’d only met Alicia once, but she reminded him, in some ways, of Kathy. Tiberius might have chosen well. “It’s not something I want to attend, but I may have no choice.”

“I don’t think that you count as a vital family member,” Anderson said, dryly. Colin had to smile. Apart from a bastard some few generations back, his family tree was decidedly common. Some of the Family matrons could barely bring themselves to acknowledge his existence. “You could just turn down the invitation.”

“You have got to be joking,” Frandsen said, a second later. “Here, we can pretty much guarantee your safety, unless they manage to get shipkillers launched at the city. In Tiberius’s estate… they could do anything to you. Colin, I hope you’re not considering going, not seriously.”

“I may have no choice,” Colin repeated. He scowled down at the invitation. It was handmade, a beautiful piece of craftsmanship under almost any situation, but Frandsen was right. The odds were that it was an invitation to a trap. He admired the workmanship of the artist, thinking hard. They had to understand the problem before they could advise him. “Tiberius is a member of the Cabinet in good standing.”

He held up a hand before they could object. “Officially, there is no break between the pair of us, so being invited — and accepting the invite — is pretty much compulsory,” he continued. “If I snub him, it will look as if I *am* snubbing him, in public. The outside observers, the reporters, the chattering classes, will take my snub and run with it. They will decide that Tiberius is on the way out and that news, in the wrong place, will inflict harm on the Empire.”

The thought was maddening. If he moved against Tiberius, in the stark certainty that he intended to kill him, he would look like a tyrant. The first-rank worlds would consider breaking ranks. His supporters would fear him and start preparing contingency plans for his removal. His enemies would see the writing on the wall and strike first… and all his hopes and dreams for the Empire would wither and die. He couldn’t allow it to happen, which meant that he had to expose himself to enemy fire, as crazy as it seemed.

“That is as nothing compared to the harm that would befall the Empire if anything happened to you,” Frandsen said, firmly. “The entire Provisional Government would come apart at the seams. You’re the only person holding it together. Parliament can’t go in the same direction without bickering… and the Imperial Navy will fragment without you. Admiral Wilhelm may win by default.”

Colin scowled. The news of Wakanda had come in last night; a first-rank world, the least of the first-rank worlds, had fallen to Admiral Wilhelm, almost without a fight. They hadn’t even placed a destroyer in a position to observe the battle and report to the Imperial Navy, so the only visuals they had of the battle came from a freighter captain who had risked her ship to record as much as she could… and it wasn’t enough to help calculate losses. The only point that everyone could agree on was that Wakanda had been crushed and occupied.

His eyes fell on the starchart. Assuming that Admiral Wilhelm left at once, he was going to be within two weeks of Earth, or days of the next possible target world. Colin privately suspected that Admiral Wilhelm wouldn’t bother punching out other first-rank worlds — it wouldn’t actually gain him anything beyond more enemies — but instead he would come straight for Earth. It might even win him some allies among the first-rank worlds if he made the right promises and offered the right deals. They didn’t even have an accurate read on his fleet’s strength, which meant that Colin couldn’t spare anything from Earth to reinforce the first-rank worlds. The war seemed to have faded into a state where the best he could do was wait to be hit.

“That may be true,” Colin said, dragging his attention back to the two men. It *was* true and, without false modesty, he knew it. Joshua Wachter, irony of ironies, might have been the only other person who could have held the Imperial Navy together, but he was officially dead. God alone knew what had happened to him, or what Tiberius had in mind, but Colin had some very nasty suspicions. “It’s also not up for debate. I have to attend the wedding.”

Frandsen scowled. “Permission to speak freely, sir?” Colin nodded. Frandsen was rarely so formal. “Sir, with all due respect, it’s a mistake, a stupid mistake. You will be venturing into the lion’s den, a place controlled by a person whom you *know* wants to kill you and destroy all that you stand for. You may as well paint a big target on your back and tattoo the words ‘please shoot here’ on your forehead.”

Colin smiled without humour. “Neil…”

“It’s not an issue of showing bravery under fire, or even under threat of fire,” Frandsen continued. “You’re not a young and expendable Midshipman any longer. God knows I have sent young Marines to their deaths, expecting — knowing — that some of the young men and women will die, but I had no choice. When I served as

their commander, I could not take foolish risks…"

"You *did* lead the boarding party back at Macore personally," Anderson observed.

Frandsen scowled at him before turning his attention back to Colin. "You should not attend this wedding," he said, firmly. "Sir, please…"

"I must agree with Neil," Anderson said, flatly. The kindest thing he normally said about Marines was that they were knuckle-dragging cavemen. Colin had rarely heard him actually agreeing outright with Frandsen, who competed with him for Colin's attention. "I do not believe that we can guarantee your safety."

"My safety isn't the issue," Colin said.

"Your safety is the Empire's safety," Frandsen said, tiredly. He rolled his eyes just enough to venture into insubordination. "See previous rant."

"And see mine," Colin said, softly. "I cannot *not* attend the wedding, Neil."

"I know," Frandsen said. "God help us."

"But we will take precautions," Colin said. He leaned forward. "I don't know if Tiberius actually does intend to try something stupid at the wedding, but if he does, I want to be ready for him."

"He'll do more than try," Frandsen said. He glowered down at the floor, as if he were expecting it to sprout weapons and try to kill them. The Empire had been known to use booby-traps to kill the unwary in the past. "If he can't kill you with all the odds in his favour…"

He left the sentence unfinished.

"I know," Colin said. They shared a tight grin. "This is what we are going to do."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The planet of Wakanda, Admiral Wilhelm decided, after his brief victory tour, was a dump. It wasn't just the government, or what was left of it after outraged crowds vented their feelings on everyone they could reach, or the damage left after police skimmers had used heavy weapons on unprotected crowds, but the very feeling of despondency that seemed to lie everywhere. The slums surrounding the spaceport, filled with more unproductive men, women and children than he'd ever seen in his life, the crumbling cities, the obvious criminal gangs preying on anyone who wasn't well-protected… the entire planet was falling apart. He'd skimmed through one of the government's broachers, trying to convince the people that all was well, and had had to laugh. Wakanda had no past, no present… and no future.

He scowled as the last of the planet's governing class was finally evicted out of the airlock, his overweight body spinning in space as he clawed hopelessly for salvation, or a rescue that would never come. The man had been a murderer many times over, just through sheer stupidity and ignorance. He'd had no choice, but to make a brutal example of the Wakanda Space Navy, even though it was definitely overkill. The new government he had installed on the planet, one loyal to him with the forces required to back up its demands, could only be an improvement, but Wakanda was too far gone to be saved. Shock treatment was required, but he didn't have the time, ort the motivation. It would be a project for a more peaceful time.

"The fat arsehole will be burning up in a few hours," Captain Keene assured him. He'd served with Admiral Wilhelm long enough to be completely trusted. "The people down on the surface will cheer."

"Perhaps," Admiral Wilhelm agreed. The people of Wakanda would be nursing their wounds after their government had put their revolution down so savagely. They certainly didn't have the experience or determination to rebuild their shattered world. He rather suspected that most of the younger population would try to emigrate, leaving the older population to die, unless they were recruited into his forces first. There were worlds governed by the worst of the Thousand Families, the ones so embarrassing that they were effectively banned from Earth, that were better run. "It's not our concern anyway."

He took one last look at the dwindling figure, drifting down towards the planet as tradition dictated for the death of a traitor, before pushing it from his mind. An overweight person was apparently a powerful person on Wakanda, for reasons that might even make sense, given that the planet was barely capable of feeding its teeming

masses. The planet would just have to learn — he smiled thinly — to trim the fat. If they didn't learn, the consequences of their disastrous government would catch up with them and impose their own solution.

"Come on," he said, and led the way out of the airlock's control room. Keene followed him silently until they finally reached his flag cabin. Without Carola, whose taste was so much better than his own, he had stripped out most of the artworks and placed them in storage, replacing them with a large tactical display. It was blinking alarmingly when they entered and he pulled up the message… and swore.

"They hit Ysalt," he said, and swore again. The rebels had hit back hard… and, somehow, had picked a near-perfect target. The effectively-complete destruction of the supply dumps would impose strict limits on how far his fleet could operate, a desperate attempt to buy time… that would work, unless he could find a way to operate without the supplies. "They didn't occupy the world, but they didn't have to waste their time trying."

He scowled as Keene read through the message. Ysalt hadn't been particularly important for centuries and he'd counted on that when he'd developed it as a supply base, but the rebels had managed to locate it and destroy the supplies. His ships needed the supply of missiles and spare parts to operate — even though the best efforts of the Wakanda Space Navy had inflicted absolutely no damage whatsoever — and that supply had just been savagely reduced. The rebels had somehow managed to make a fleet train work without supply bases and convoys, but he hadn't had the time to set up a similar system. It was a weakness, he saw in cold hindsight, that he had believed that they couldn't take advantage of. He had been wrong.

Keene's mind was working along similar lines. "They're forced us to reroute supplies directly from Cottbus," he said. Admiral Wilhelm nodded. There was no reason why that wasn't possible, but it would merely add more delay, not least in getting the instructions back to Cottbus to do just that. Worse, they would have to rely on a convoy system… and *that* would mean diverting escorts from the war front. "That affects our ability to carry out the next stage of the plan."

Admiral Wilhelm stared at him. "Tell me something I don't know, please," he said, unable to keep the slow-building anger out of his voice. "I know the consequences as well as you do, perhaps better."

His Flag Captain cleared his throat. "We fired off twenty percent of missile stocks on the superdreadnaughts that engaged at Wakanda," he said, consulting a datapad. That, too, had come back to haunt them. A more restrained approach to the task of trashing the Wakanda Space Navy would have been less spectacular, but more helpful in the

long run. Fired missiles didn't re-materialise out of nowhere, whatever some computer game simulation designers thought. "Two-thirds of the fleet didn't even enter the system and *they* still have full missile loads. The fleet's combat power has not been significantly reduced."

"Not now," Admiral Wilhelm agreed, sourly. He appreciated his aide's attempt to take the best possible view of the debacle, but he was no Family scion, deaf to all, but good news. In a sense, he was entirely correct. A fleet like the one he commanded -according to standard doctrine — couldn't be broken up by a fleet that wasn't at least equal in firepower. Pre-war training had assumed that a three-to-one advantage was required to guarantee success, but pre-war analysts had never anticipated arsenal ships. "It will come back to haunt us later."

He tapped the controls and called up a standard starchart, looking down at the Empire from high above. Tactical icons, representing his forces, glowed brightly, outshining dimmer icons that represented his intelligence crew's best guess at rebel dispositions. The information could be — probably was — outdated by now, but it looked alarming, on the surface. It was, in fact, still a highly advantageous situation — to him.

But it wouldn't last. He was operating deep within unfriendly territory — he had no illusions as to how the first-rank worlds would view him — with very limited support. The rebels might not have a force capable of breaking his fleet that they could spare from defence duties, but it hardly mattered. He could turn on the first-rank worlds and wreck havoc, but that would drain his arsenals and give the rebels time to concentrate their forces. The war would go on for years, but once the rebels struck back at Cottbus, the outcome would be certain. After his ambush of the rebel fleet — which, far from being broken, had wrecked his supply bases at Ysalt — he didn't expect mercy, even if he offered to surrender. His only choice was to continue the war.

And there were only a handful of targets that might prove decisive.

"An interesting problem," he mused, finally. He stoked his beard while concentrating his thoughts, noting absently that it had been weeks since he had heard anything from Carola, even though the intelligence network he'd 'inherited' from Lady Madeline Hohenzollern. He was more worried about her than he cared to admit, although he was fairly sure that the rebels would do nothing to harm her, at least until it was safe to do so. He would wreck a terrible revenge if they hurt one hair on her head. "We have a window of opportunity, so where do we strike?"

A Flag Captain had to be his Admiral's alter ego, offering advice and caution, whatever the situation. "AlphaCent is heavily defended

and actually hard to approach safely," Keene said, after a moment. The binary star system — with a third companion star far too close for comfort when the flicker drive was concerned — could be dangerous for interstellar starships. "They would certainly have warning of our coming and they wouldn't allow us to take the shipyards intact."

"Which would leave us effectively defenceless," Admiral Wilhelm agreed. The rebel forces massed at AlphaCent, perhaps the second most sensitive location in the Empire, wouldn't be the pushovers that the Wakanda Space Navy had been. He was confident of a victory, but the cost would be steep… and they wouldn't be able to replace their missiles quickly. They would have to withdraw almost at once, all the way back to Cottbus itself, just to reload. Who knew what the rebels could get up to in that time? "It would also be pointless destruction."

He altered the display slightly. "And Earth itself?"

Keene considered it. "Victory, complete victory, if we win," he said. "The rebel Provisional Government would have to stand and fight. They wouldn't have a choice, unless they wanted to retreat and leave us with Earth. That leaves us with a more interesting problem — do we have the firepower, with us now, to defeat the rebels in battle above Earth?"

Admiral Wilhelm smiled darkly. Lady Madeline Hohenzollern's intelligence network was actually fairly good when it came to political matters — although if they had known that Madeline was currently cooling her heels in one of his more unattractive cells, her friends and relatives would probably have been less eager to help — but the network wasn't so good with military problems. It wouldn't be able to address specific questions, such as how many starships were deployed to defend Earth, or who was in command of the Shadow Fleet, or anything else that might have been useful for anyone planning an offensive. It might not have mattered. The odds were that he didn't know anyone who would be in a position of power in the Shadow Fleet. Colin Harper, the rebel leader, had been a mere Commander before the rebellion. The other leaders were equally obscure.

But he knew enough to gamble. "I believe so," he said, carefully side-stepping the obvious question. The cold hard laws governing interstellar warfare told him that he had no choice, but to seek a quick victory — or accept defeat. The rebels still had control over far more industry and, given time, they could make continuing the war impossible. He recited, slowly, words that Carola had taught him, just before she'd departed for Earth onboard the *Victorious*.

> "He either fears his fate too much,
> "Or his deserts are small,
> "That puts it not unto the touch,

"To win or lose it all."

Keene blinked. "Sir?"

"We have to move on Earth, one final throw of the dice, or accept defeat," Admiral Wilhelm said. Keene would understand, as well as himself, that the plan had miscarried badly enough to require extreme measures. They hadn't anticipated the loss of the supply dumps. "So… we move on Earth, and damned be he who first says, hold, enough."

He cast his gaze back to the display, watching the sway of tactical icons, each one representing a starship or an orbital defence fortress, and smiled. Earth was, in theory, heavily defended, but at the same time, it presented almost unique challenges for the defenders. The sheer level of habitation and industry in the system was staggering to contemplate. Humanity's birthworld might have been nearly deserted, apart from the Thousand Families, their servants and now the Provisional Government, but the remainder of the system was heavily populated. An attacker who was prepared to be careful had some advantages that would be denied the defenders.

His mouth broadened into a smile. "They'll see us coming, of course," he said. There weren't that many targets worthy of his fleet. "They'll know we're on the way, but they won't realise the true danger, until it's too late."

He straightened up and turned to face Keene. "Captain, contact the other ships and inform them that we will be flickering out within the hour for the first waypoint, and then proceeding directly to a waypoint only a few light years from Earth. Tell them that when we rendezvous there, I want to see their starships at the peak of their condition. I want to see trained crews and sparkling decks. I'll confer with the other Admirals. You work on the Captains."

"Aye, sir," Keene said, rising to his feet.

"And tell them," Admiral Wilhelm added, "to prepare for victory."

He smiled as the hatch hissed closed behind Keene. The other Admirals would object, of course, but they would know that there was no choice. They had to make for Earth and, win or lose, they would make a grab for true power, or bring the entire system crashing down. The old order would never be restored.

* * *

Carola Wilhelm was starting to see why prison had been such an effective deterrent, at least for someone used to all kinds of mental simulation. Her cell was a small metal cube, three meters by three

meters, with a bunk, a sink and a toilet, nothing else. It hadn't taken her more than a minute to search the entire cell, revealing nothing beyond an uncomfortable pile of bedding and a single plastic cup. A quick check revealed that the cup was unbreakable and suicide, even if she had been contemplating it, wasn't a possibility. The cell was impregnable by anything short of cutting lasers and perhaps fission blades… and somehow she had forgotten to bring them with her. She hadn't been searched when she'd been escorted into her new home, but the closest thing she had to a weapon were her fingernails. Escape was impossible.

She lay on the bunk, staring at nothing. There was little in the cell to entertain her, or even to force her to use her mind, not even a possibility of escape. She counted sheep, or played games of chess in her head, but no amount of thinking could distract her from the fact she was bored. She had expected interrogators to come into the cell and start shouting questions, even if they didn't break out the torture kits, or truth drugs, and she would almost have welcomed the distraction. Instead, she had been left in the cell… and she had no idea how long it had been since she had been a free woman. Going by meals, which arrived through a slit in the wall, she had been there for at least a week, but it was hard to tell. She didn't even have a pen to make marks on the walls.

The door clicked, bringing her to instant attention. A thin light shone in from outside, revealing a tall slender form, very definitely female. Silhouetted, it was impossible to make out her features, but Carola knew who it was, who it had to be.

"Gwendolyn," she said, surprised at how hoarse her voice had become. She normally talked throughout the day. "What a *pleasure* to see you here."

Gwendolyn leaned forward. When she spoke, her voice was far more serious than Carola remembered. "There isn't much time," she whispered. "Getting into here took longer than I expected and the replacement guards will be on shift soon enough. Listen carefully. Your husband took Wakanda around a week ago, interstellar time."

Carola blinked. "Wakanda?"

"A first-rank world, on the edge of Sector 19," Gwendolyn said, flatly. Carola nodded, remembering. Wakanda had been so obscure that she hadn't heard of it until Admiral Wilhelm had begun discussion war plans. It certainly hadn't remained in her mind. Wakanda was an interstellar backwater. "We don't know exactly what happened, but its fairly clear that he took the planet."

"I see," Carola said. She frowned, cursing her own mind. The stay in jail had taken some of the edge off her thoughts. It felt as if she were trying to think through cotton wool. "Where am I, anyway?"

Gwendolyn gave her an odd look. “Navajo Detention Centre,” she said, after a moment. Carola had worked out that she wasn’t on the moon, in the dreaded Luna Detention Centre, but she didn’t know any other detention centres on Earth. It had been a surprise to learn that they existed. “We need your help.”

“We?” Carola asked, for all the world as if she was a queen — no, an Empress — receiving a supplicant. “Who is this *we*, Gwendolyn?”

“Figures of influence who want the war to end,” Gwendolyn said. “We can get you free from this place and out to your husband, in exchange for you agreeing to mediate between us and him.”

“Indeed?” Carola asked. It was tempting to agree, but now that the war had started in earnest, hardly necessary. Gwendolyn and the rest of her kind, aristocrats all, didn’t understand that Admiral Wilhelm’s victory meant their end. “And why should I agree to that?”

“Because otherwise you might not survive the next few weeks,” Gwendolyn said. Carola, who had expected the threat, was unmoved. “You don’t understand what is happening here.”

“Don’t I?” Carola asked. It felt so *good* to unburden herself of scorn and hatred. “You’re rats deserting a sinking ship.”

Gwendolyn seemed amused. “Maybe,” she said, a thin smile playing around her lips, as if she knew something that Carola didn’t know. “Or maybe not. Will you help us?”

Carola smiled. “Sure,” she lied, smoothly. It would provide a few moments of amusement until the end of the war. “Why not?”

“Good,” Gwendolyn said. She glanced down at the timepiece on her wrist. “I’ll be back here soon enough. Goodbye.”

She left, the door clicking and locking behind her.

Carola smiled as she lay back on the bunk. The game was afoot again.

She was quite looking forward to it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Commander Irving Roberts looked up from his report as the near-planet orbital monitor chirped a warning.

"Report," he ordered, looking over at one of the tactical officers, operating her station and showing her inexperience with every movement. Schubert had been stripped of all, but a small cadre of experienced officers for the war and it showed. Roberts himself was the most experienced officer on the fortress and, if he hadn't been suffering from a rare degenerative nerve disease that kept him trapped in a hoverchair, he would have been taken from the planet as well. Admiral Wilhelm had stripped the sector bare for his fleet.

The tactical officer's voice showed her excitement. "I have a single *Mars*-class bulk freighter just flickering in from Cottbus," she said, as the display automatically downgraded the threat level by a degree. A single *Mars*-class freighter might be used as a warship by a particularly poor or desperate pirate group, but no one in their right mind would try to take it up against a single gunboat, let alone a million-ton fortress. "They're transmitting an IFF now, sir."

"Very good," Roberts said dryly, trying to keep his amusement out of his voice. It was heart-warming how hard the newly-trained crews tried to impress him, seeing him as a sophisticated officer and role model. They would have been less impressed if they had known that his handful of combat missions had all been against pirates, rather than rebels or alien threats. "Hail them and demand to know what they're carrying and why they're not being escorted."

He frowned down at the console, stroking his chin, as the tactical officer leapt to obey. In theory, it was impossible for a starship to be intercepted between the stars, but in practice it was fairly easy to do so, given a degree of luck or sometimes foreknowledge. The Empire rarely used convoys, but Admiral Wilhelm had organised a convoy system for the Cottbus Sector, although most of the escorts had been called off to the war front. The planet's government had been worried about the possible economic downturn caused by the war, but Roberts' concerns were simpler. If a freighter was travelling without an escort, what had happened to its escort?

"And ask them for an update," he added. If nothing else, it would make for a welcome change from the boredom of tracking the STL craft that mined the asteroids and gas giants in the system. "I want their full details as soon as possible."

The thought made him smile. A military crew would have answered at once; a freighter crew would tend to delay as long as possible, either to make their official oppressors annoyed, or just

because they didn't have anyone on the bridge when the signals were transmitted. It was a permanent point of friction between the civil and military communities, a cause of considerable bad feeling. Personally, Roberts didn't really care, but the Imperial Navy as a whole had found it annoying. *They* would have preferred freighters to follow military discipline at all times.

"They're identifying themselves as the *Star of Humber*," the tactical officer said. The name meant nothing to Roberts. Freighters tended to carry all kinds of names, rather than the strictly-formalised nomenclature of the Imperial Navy, and a single name meant nothing. It was quite easy to alter an IFF beacon to send out a false signal and nothing short of an inspection tour would reveal the truth. A freighter rarely had its name engraved on the hull. "They're claiming that they had no escort; they came directly from Driscoll and that they're carrying farming machinery."

Roberts smiled. That explained the lack of an escort. Farming machinery was useless to pirates; indeed, shipping it on an interstellar freighter was normally a waste of money. Basic farming equipment could be produced at any local industrial node, unless it was destined for a newly-settled world… and there were several third-rank worlds in the sector that would pay through the nose for farming gear, even when every freighter in the sector was supposed to be serving the war effort.

"Understood," he said, calmly. The *Mars*-class ships were old enough to require frequent refuelling from an orbital facility. Schubert, it so happened, had a good reputation for cheap fuel. The four gas giants in the system provided enough fuel for the entire spacefaring community, military and civilian. Mining them was a well-understood practice after two thousand years in space. "Clear them for docking at one of the stations and pass their communications code to the station manager. They can see how much the crew is willing to pay for a fuel load."

He turned his gaze back to the display, watching the freighter advancing ponderously into the gravity shadow, heading down towards one of the commercial stations. They would, he noted absently, be passing fairly close to his fortress and considered using them for a tracking exercise, before dismissing the thought. The freighter crew might have come to his world in hopes of a cheaper deal on refined spaceship fuel, but that wouldn't excuse scaring hell out of them when their ship was lit up by military-grade targeting sensors, suggesting that they were about to be used for target practice.

"They're not moving quite rightly," the tactical officer said, puzzled. She would have been a pretty girl under any circumstances, but right now she was frowning. Roberts ordered his chair to hover

over to her position, allowing him to peer over her shoulder and down at her display. “They’re moving as if they’re holding back some of their drive field…”

She stopped, unable to explain what she was seeing. It took Roberts a moment to see it and he had to admit that if she hadn’t seen it, without knowing what she was looking at, he might well have missed it. The freighter was holding a fairly low speed, roughly a third of what such a ship should be capable of in a gravity field, but it looked as if it were ready and raring to run. It would have committed several breeches of orbital manoeuvring regulations if it had sped up, but the drive field was flickering as if they intended to move much faster… and if they had more power to burn.

“Interesting,” he said, without committing himself. She expected him to have the answers, but he was more than a little baffled. The crew might have replaced their old drives with newer units, but that would have been a job for a shipyard, which would have been costly. No one in their right mind would just insert newer drive units into a starship and hope for the best. They had to be properly secured or the ship would shake itself apart. “Run a more focused scan. Let me know if there are any other discrepancies.”

He found himself caught in a blind. It could be innocent. He’d seen plenty of freighters and even warships that had been modified in decidedly non-spec manners, even to the point of posing a danger to their crews. There were no legal grounds to have the freighter boarded and searched, not yet, but he had the authority… in theory. The local merchant unions would protest, loudly, if he searched a refuelling ship just on suspicion. For a moment, he considered asking her to place the request, passing the buck, but he liked to think he was a better officer than that. What sort of lesson would that teach the kids under his command?

“Contact them directly,” he ordered, finally. “Order them to heave to and prepared to be boarded. If they protest, explain that we’re running a standard exercise and that if they cooperate, they will be given a major discount on their fuel.” He paused, waiting for her to complete the first task. “Now contact the gunboats and inform them that I want two of them in position to intercept the freighter, with a Marine shuttle following to board her and ask a few questions. Apprise them of our suspicions and tell the Marines to be careful.”

She blinked. “Just careful, sir?”

“Just careful,” Roberts confirmed. Junior officers rarely learned how to delegate at first; it was something that came with experience. The thought of her attempting to tell Marines what to do was amusing. “Trust in the man on the spot to know what he’s doing.”

He smiled, a smile which, a moment later, vanished from his face.

“They’re not stopping,” he said, seeing the freighter altering course, as if it intended to climb back out of the gravity shadow and vanish. Its ponderous bulk would take at least a minute to even change course slightly, let alone reverse entirely, it was even staggering towards their position. They had to be insane. A single brush with the fortress’s weapons would vaporise their ship. “Contact them again and order them to cut their drives, *now*!”

“No response, sir,” the tactical officer said. Her hands danced over the console, attempting to bring up newer readings, ones that might explain the paradox. “They’re still trying to reverse course.”

Roberts found himself thinking quickly. If they were smugglers, or had something else onboard that they didn’t want the Marines finding, they had acted in a manner that made no sense. Refusing to obey orders from System Command was a major offence; the Captain would be lucky if he wasn’t summarily arrested and dispatched to a penal world. The fines alone would probably wipe out all the profit from the run… and it was so futile. They couldn’t escape.

“Contact the gunboats,” he said, regretfully, “and order them to fire into their drives to force them to halt.”

He watched as the gunboats arced towards the freighter, which was still moving, however ponderously, towards the fortress. The gunboats, being much smaller than the freighter, could accelerate to their top speed almost instantly… and, even this close to a planet, that speed was awesome. The freighter could have had a twenty-minute start and it still couldn’t have escaped. The popguns mounted on the gunboats would have no problem dealing with the freighter, even if they wouldn’t have dented an unshielded warship. There was nothing about the entire situation that made sense, unless it was some demented…

“Commander,” the tactical officer snapped, as the display suddenly flared with red icons. It took Roberts a moment to grasp what he was seeing. It was so unexpected. “They’re firing… *oh, my god!*”

Roberts flinched himself. He’d seen it, too late. It wasn’t a freighter at all, but an arsenal ship… and he’d allowed it into prime firing range of the fortress. Hundreds and thousands of missiles were pouring out of the hulk, their drives kicking in and launching them towards his station in an endless stream of death and destruction. There were bare minutes until they arrived… and he hadn’t even brought the point defence online. He hit the emergency alert key, knowing that his crew would race to their stations as quickly as possible… and that they would be far too late.

“Focus,” he snapped at the tactical officer. Her eyes were wide and staring, a faint smell revealed that she had urinated involuntarily.

“Leave the precise targeting for now; bring the point defence online and authorise the computers to target the incoming missiles!”

She merely stared at him. Roberts pushed her out of the way with the arm of his chair and took over the console, keying up the point defence systems and triggering them with his override codes. Automated systems were never allowed to fire without human authorisation, at least not outside certain very specific situations, a paranoid safety measure that had cost them precious seconds. The point defence weapons hadn’t even been charged and ready for instant deployment. The mere process of charging them would eat still more of their remaining time…

“Hit that ship,” he ordered, tightly, as the missiles started to enter terminal attack vector, bringing up their drives to full power for their final suicidal attack. There was no point in targeting the arsenal ship, not now, apart from revenge, and that was all that he had left. The enemy ship had sat right under his missile launchers and he hadn’t even noticed! The government down on the planet wouldn’t had had any warning at all. “Take them down, hurry!”

The tactical officer looked at him, her composure completely shattered. She really was as young as she looked. “We’re going to die,” she said, flatly. “Aren’t we, sir?”

Roberts refused to lie to her. “Yes, Fran,” he said, surprising her. She hadn’t known that he’d known her name. It was written all over her face. “We’re going to die.”

The first missiles lanced in towards the point defence zone and passed through, barely touched by the weapons as they closed in on their target. The fortress’s shields had snapped up, at least, but they were still going to take a pounding. The massive structure shook, time and time again, as the missiles hammered away at it, the shields finally collapsing and allowing the missiles to lash into bare hull. The fortress was armoured heavily, but the sheer weight of missiles ripped through the armour and started to detonate inside the structure.

Roberts barely had a moment to realise that it was over before the power plant finally blew and vaporised the fortress, along with its crew. They’d barely managed to destroy the arsenal ship before it killed them.

* * *

“Decloak us, now,” Katy ordered, watching as Hell itself was unleashed on the orbital defences of Schubert. The planet was alarmingly close to Cottbus itself, with a small network of orbital defences, and targeting it had been one of the hardest decisions she’d

had to make. Taking out the defences might be worthwhile, but it would inflict little damage on Admiral Wilhelm's fleet and prove costly. "All ships, engage at will."

It had taken nearly a week to slip into the system without triggering any alerts, but they'd managed it, sneaking an entire task force right up to Schubert. The defenders had had no warning at all when she'd sent the arsenal ship into their midst, the crew's sacrifice having cleared the way for her ships. A single freighter, refitted to serve as an arsenal ship, had blown the command fortress away and inflicted severe damage on other facilities. If nothing else, Admiral Wilhelm's people were going to be extremely paranoid about every other freighter that arrived, travelling on its own…

"Order the other arsenal ships to take out the remaining two fortresses," she ordered, calmly. There was no need to force them to volunteer for a suicide mission. Now that the gloves were off, they could use the arsenal ships to their best advantage without worrying about the cost. The fortresses wouldn't be able to stand off the missiles while trying to kill the empty ships. "Keep us on course for the main industrial node."

The display updated as the superdreadnaughts, their true nature now exposed to the enemy, slid through space, diving into the gravity shadow at an thoroughly insane speed. She'd been tempted to issue the same warning as she'd issued to the other worlds she'd hit, telling them to evacuate their industrial stations before it was too late and she destroyed them, but Schubert was different. It was just too close to Cottbus to waste time. They had enough time, by her most pessimistic calculation, to close with the orbital defences, destroy them and the industrial facilities, and beat a retreat. They could not wait for the facilities to be abandoned.

"Incoming fire," the tactical officer said, grimly. The display lit up as the orbital missile pods opened fire, unleashing a swarm of missiles towards her ships, which reacted to the threat as they'd been trained. Someone on the other side had clearly realised that if the missile pods weren't expended, now, they would lose them without having a chance to hit something worthwhile. Any halfway decent industrial node could turn out hundreds of missiles; Schubert, clearly, had been doing just that. "Point defence is engaging now."

Katy nodded, clutching the sides of her command chair as the red icons started to wink out, one by one. Schubert's defenders were in a state of shock and, as long as she kept pounding on them, they wouldn't have a chance to recover. They still commanded awesome levels of orbital firepower, but they just didn't have time to coordinate it into a single unit. They could have beaten her off, or forced her to accept intolerable losses, but they just didn't have the time.

The superdreadnaught rumbled as it unleashed another swarm of missiles, sending death racing through space towards the industrial facilities. Schubert had been a wealthy world once, if not quite up to first-rank status, and it had actually built a major orbital industry. That industry was dying now, blown apart by her missiles and reduced to flaming embers, floating down towards the planet. The defenders fought as best as they could, trying to save as much as possible, but they didn't have a chance.

"Signal from the planet, Admiral," the communications officer said. Her voice was almost beseeching, but Katy couldn't understand why. "They want to discuss terms of surrender."

Katy clenched her teeth. The Shadow Fleet had always given quarter when it was requested, but she couldn't accept a surrender, on any terms. How could she? She couldn't garrison the planet, nor could she wait for them to abandon their orbital facilities. By now, a destroyer or a courier boat could be halfway to Cottbus, warning them that her fleet was in the area… and they would have a clear shot at destroying it. They couldn't afford to be caught in the gravity shadow, not now…

"Ignore it," she ordered, and pretended not to see the looks of shock on some of their faces. Their innocence had died back at Cottbus, when the 2nd fleet had been ambushed and reduced to a third of its strength. "Continue the attack."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Charlie looked around the small room as their escorts closed the door behind him. It was a fairly basic storeroom, with a handful of chairs and a table placed in the centre, which suggested it was one of the hundreds of unofficial clubs for junior officers. The practice was fairly common, all over the Empire, and he'd even heard that it was encouraged, if only because of tradition. A junior officer was too lowly to club with the officers and too high-ranking to club with the enlisted men. Creating a club for themselves was regarded as a sign of something, although Charlie could never remember what. Knowing the pre-revolution Imperial Navy, it might just have been a willingness to stay out of the senior officers collective hair.

The handful of young officers in the club seemed to agree with that assessment. They were all around eighteen to thirty, all apparently Midshipmen. They wore civilian clothes in a colourfully garish display, for all the world as if they were carefree young men and women, but it was hard to disguise what they were. They hadn't yet learned to hide their military training from an experienced eye. Peter, it seemed, had done them proud.

"We cannot trust them," a woman said. She looked barely out of her teens, her voice suggesting an origin somewhere in the outer sectors. "We don't even know who they are."

Charlie kept his face blank as Sasha spoke calmly into the silence. Being so exposed worried him, but there was little choice; besides, no one in the room would be safe if they were discovered. They had to make use of whatever rebel structure existed on Cottbus, hiding from Admiral Wilhelm and Imperial Intelligence alike, if they wanted to end the war quickly. If that meant taking a risk…

"We're from Earth," Sasha said, calmly. "I admit that we cannot prove that easily to you, but yes, we represent the Provisional Government."

"The same Provisional Government whose fleet just got its ass convincingly kicked at Wakanda," someone said, from the back of the room. Charlie had seen him, barely, with his enhanced eyes. A more baseline human might have missed him completely. "The same Provisional Government whose ships were forced to retreat from this world. Why should we ally ourselves with you when you could betray us at any moment?"

"The fleet was lured into an ambush set by your commanding officer," Sasha replied, her voice still calm. They could have cut their way out of the meeting, using the weapons implants buried under their skin, but that would have cost them the chance to make contact

with the rebels. “Do you want to serve permanently under him, or do you want a chance to rise in a new system?”

Quinn smiled. “We received word about the rebellion nearly a year ago,” he said, flatly. “By the time we had anything set up to take advantage of it, the Admiral had made his move and locked up the aristocrats in their own cells.”

Charlie blinked. “The aristocrats?”

“The Hohenzollern and some other silly bitch,” the female doubter said. There was a note of dark amusement in her voice, somehow chilling when compared to her pretty face. “The Admiral used them and then dumped them in their own cells.”

Charlie nodded. That answered one question, at least. The reconstructed Imperial Intelligence had been trying to locate Lady Hohenzollern, and hundreds of other Family Members who’d fled Earth after its fall, but they’d found little trace of them. Had they all made their way to Cottbus, or the Rim, or somewhere else?

“And he clamped down hard,” Quinn agreed, unaware of Charlie’s thoughts. “He disrupted some of our cells and scattered others, sending some of the most important cell leaders to different star systems. He didn’t purge us, so I doubt that he knew what he was doing, but he disrupted us quite effectively.”

His voice was sour, bitterly amused. “We’re only just pulling back together again,” he said. “Why should we trust you to help us?”

“Because we’re the only ones who can,” Sasha said. “You can’t take the planet now, or you would have done so already. With our help, you could secure the orbital fortresses, the shipyard, and the other vital targets. That’s enough firepower to deter even four sector fleets.”

Charlie nodded, thinking hard. It was difficult to safeguard any system from internal sabotage, but Colin and the remainder of the original conspiracy had had an unfair advantage. They’d had years, while waiting for the Empire’s decision to carve up Macore as a favour to the Roosevelt Clan, to lay their plans and make them as foolproof as possible. Quinn and his fellows might not have been suspected — their very freedom was proof of that — but they had been rendered powerless, long enough to allow Admiral Wilhelm to secure his own grip on power. He’d done it without even knowing who they were.

“Perhaps,” the male doubter agreed. He came into the light, revealing a scarred face, marked for life. A series of regeneration treatments would have removed the scar, but he’d chosen, instead, to keep it. It said something about his character. “And what happens to us, if we rebel and manage to convince the Admiral not to attack at once, when he finds out the news?”

“And why should we rebel?” The female doubter added. “The

Admiral doesn't have a few hundred relatives who have to get posts because of who their great-uncles fucked one cold night a century ago. Where do our interests lie?"

Sasha smiled dryly. "You already know the answer to that, or you wouldn't be meeting with us," she said. "Admiral Wilhelm intends to impose military rule. You know that — hell, you're part of it, just as much as the reprogrammed SD Troopers and the policemen he's been recruiting to help garrison worlds that he takes from the Empire. He wants a war of conquest against the remainder of the Empire, shattering systems that have existed for hundreds of years, just for his glory — and your deaths."

She leaned closer. "You're all junior officers," she said. "In the old Imperial Navy, you would be lucky to rise above Commander, unless you found a powerful patron. In the new Imperial Navy, the one created by Colin Harper, you would rise to the levels your talents allowed. You wouldn't have to suck up to senior officers, or spend time sucking the cocks of the powerful, not when your own competence could get you into high rank. Is that not worth fighting for?

"And even if you decide not to rebel, what then? What happens when Admiral Wilhelm needs new crewmen for his new ships? He's taking on the entire galaxy, for God's sake! What are the odds of any of you surviving the next ten years?"

She looked around the room, her eyes moving from face to face. "And consider this," she concluded. "Military rule never ends well. The Empire is far too complex for the Imperial Navy to dictate the rules and expect them to be kept. There's already been one rebellion and Admiral Wilhelm won't even have the legacy of thousands of years to keep him in power. What happens when he dies, or when the four Admirals begin scrabbling over who gets to be Emperor, or… how many possibilities can *you* think of? Where do your loyalties lie?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. "We swore loyalty to the Empire," Quinn said, finally. "We were younger then. We didn't know what the Imperial Navy was really like…"

"But you know now," Sasha pressed. "You have the choice between supporting Admiral Wilhelm in his attempt to burn down the Empire and replace it with his rule, or join the Provisional Government." She looked over at the two doubters. "The Imperial Navy and the Shadow Fleet have accepted thousands of people who started out on the wrong side, even including Admiral Wachter. You would be free to join at your current ranks and work your way up the ladder. If you managed to take Cottbus, you would have one hell of a bargaining chip."

A younger woman, barely out of the Academy, laughed. "We

heard that anyone who took a starship and brought it to the Shadow Fleet would hold command," she said. "We would have an entire planet under our command, right?"

"The planet would have to become a democratic state," Sasha said. "The Provisional Government intends to give each and every planet in the Empire effective first-rank status, including Cottbus and Earth itself. You would be welcome to assume command of the defences, or of the shipyard, or even of some of the starships here."

Quinn silently canvassed his fellows. "You make a good case," he said, finally. "I believe that we should join you, however…" He shrugged. "We have to discuss it in private, if you don't mind."

One of the handful of enlisted men came forward and escorted Sasha and Charlie out of the club and into a smaller room, which was as bare as a prison cell. Charlie spent a quick moment scanning it for listening devices, but found nothing, not even a simple location beacon. They didn't talk as they waited as patiently as they could, enhanced ears straining for signs of discussion, or argument. Charlie found himself pacing backwards and forwards, even in the tiny room, knowing just how vulnerable they were. If Quinn and his compatriots decided to sell them out…

He scowled. Sasha had told the truth, but Cottbus was a far larger target than a starship, even a superdreadnaught. Taking even one of the orbital fortresses would be difficult, while the fixed defences were backed up by three squadrons of superdreadnaughts. They would have to be taken as well, unless they could be countered somehow… or was that actually true? What would the superdreadnaughts do if they suddenly found that the orbital fortresses were in the grasp of rebels and traitors? Would they attack at once, or would they wait for Admiral Wilhelm to come running back from wherever he was to recover his base?

And if he decides to stay away, we've won, he thought. *If Quinn cooperates, we could win the war in one fell swoop*.

It was tempting to discuss it with Sasha, but they couldn't guarantee their privacy, so he waited, pacing, until she finally ordered him to take a seat and wait. They could hear raised voices now, the inner heart of the rebellion arguing over its course of action, and Charlie winced. Quinn had been lucky, so far, but if they were arguing then they might splinter. He'd studied the records of the successful — and unsuccessful — mutinies carefully. Several of the unsuccessful ones had been defeated, not though the efforts of the authorities, but by the mutineers having a falling out and betrayal. If Quinn went the same way…

We can't even call on the Admiral to help, he thought, grimly. *Even if we knew where she was, we couldn't call on her to help.*

The door opened and Quinn stepped in. “We decided to join you,” he said, without preamble. There was a grim note in his voice. He had no illusions, Charlie was relieved to see, about the difficulty of their task. The first mutinies had been easy, but the successive ones had been much harder. “I hope that your help is worth the risk.”

“Oh, trust me,” Sasha said. “It is.”

* * *

The next two days passed quickly. Quinn, it turned out, had had cells of rebels scattered all over the planet, most of them in lower-ranking positions that could be used to help confuse the security forces. The Admiral had scattered the cells, but in doing so, he had unwittingly created a second danger. The various rebels had been able to make contact with others who shared the same views, spreading the mutinous sentiments far and wide. Admiral Wilhelm’s base was rotting away under him.

But it wasn’t going to be easy, Charlie warned, and Quinn accepted the lesson. The Admiral’s security forces were carefully positioned to block any rebellion, even if he did have more faith in his people than Admiral Percival had ever shown. The rebels needed to gain control of the high orbitals — or, at least, the fifteen fortresses circling the planet — or the rebellion would be a bloody failure. He doubted, somehow, that Admiral Wilhelm would hesitate to bombard the planet to punish the rebels; despite his claims, there was no trace of a democratic government. Cottbus was controlled directly from the orbiting command fortress and if there was any resistance, Charlie hadn’t seen any evidence of it. The old government, the one established by the founding Clan, was clearly no longer in existence. He couldn’t decide if it were an improvement or not.

He looked down at the computer console in front of him and smiled. The nice thing about computers was that they did as they were told. The access backdoors that Imperial Intelligence had programmed into every system the Empire had produced helped — no one could have shut them all down — but the access they had obtained through Quinn and his people was far more useful. With a little ingenuity, the computers had been convinced that Charlie and Sasha were personnel with every right to go where they pleased, including the orbital fortresses. Quinn himself had been assigned to a rotating personnel pool that saw him on the fortresses every fortnight for a week-long period — apparently to ensure that they kept their edge — but again, it was easy to alter the system so that the rebels were all on the fortresses at the same time. It was even possible to have messages sent

from rebel to rebel without monitoring programs picking them up and reporting them.

"It is important not to overuse this facility," he'd warned, when he'd introduced the secret communications system to the inner circle of conspirators. The news about Admiral Garland's recent raid had sent the entire planet into a state of shock, forcing Admiral Wilhelm's viceroy to start running more persistent security measures. "The monitoring programs should class them as part of the general data download shared between the fortresses, but too many signals might alert a human operator, who might not be one of us."

The second problem had been weapons. The Imperial Navy, in stark contrast to the Shadow Fleet, tended to keep weapons out of the hands of its junior officers and enlisted men, although it saw to it that they had proper weapons training. Colin had solved that problem by enlisting the Marines on his side, but Quinn had no Marine contacts… and, in any case, Admiral Wilhelm's Marines and tame SD Troopers were not allowed on the fortresses. It was a fairly basic precaution; Admiral Percival, too, had banned Marines from his ships. The only access to the weapons locker on each of the fortresses belonged to the Captain, forcing Charlie to take the risk of uploading new commands into the network, clearing the leader of the rebels to open the weapons lockers at the right time. They had also risked giving the rebels the covert operations pistols that they had brought with them on the *Neddy Seagoon*.

"These will not shoot through battle armour, so be careful whom you try to shoot," Sasha had explained, to the handful of rebels who had attended her brief tutorial. The tiny pistols looked rather like children's toys, ones that might be found in any stocking, but they were deadly in the right hands. "They don't set off security scanners, so you can smuggle them onto the fortresses without setting off all kinds of alerts, but be careful. If the security forces find even one of these, they will *know* who is to blame."

Sandra hadn't been happy to be left almost completely out of the plans, but someone had to remain behind, if only to report on what had happened to the other two agents. Her links with Andy Gillingham might be useful, while it also gave her an excuse to operate separately from them, although none of them had any illusions about how long that would last. If Admiral Wilhelm's people caught any of them, it wouldn't take them long to locate the remaining two members, or at least to put out an alert.

"You two had better be careful," she'd said, when Sasha had told her the plan. "If you don't come back, I'll kill you personally."

Charlie was still smiling at the thought when he boarded the shuttle, hidden in the midst of a group of other enlisted men, some of

whom had been summoned from all over the planet. Admiral Wilhelm had been rotating his personnel, for no clear reason, but it worked in their favour. Very few of the enlisted men and women would know each other if they had never worked together before, so they wouldn't notice that they suddenly had two newcomers. Even if they knew some of their fellows, they wouldn't know all of them, or so the plan went. If they were wrong…

He put it out of his mind as the shuttle lifted off the ground and headed towards the command fortress. If they were wrong, they were dead. If they were right, they might still die, but they would have given it their best shot. There was no reason to be nervous. The panic caused by the raid on Schubert provided more than adequate cover for their mission.

But I'm still nervous, he acknowledged, if only to himself. It had been years since he had had to pose as an enlisted man, but the skills had never been forgotten. It helped that the Empire only expected enlisted men to obey orders and show no initiative of their own. There were no portholes in the shuttle — it had been designed for lower-ranking personnel, not tourists or senior officers — but he could imagine the atmosphere giving way to the darkness of space. It might become his tomb

And that, he thought, with a flicker of amusement, *would be a damn silly way to die*.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Are you nervous?"

Tiberius flinched, half-convinced that Alicia knew everything. He hadn't told her anything about Daria, or about Cordova, or the plan to unseat — assassinate — Colin, even though she was his lover. She wasn't Family and, therefore, couldn't be really trusted. The fact that Daria knew enough to bring down half of the Thousand Families was bad enough; he didn't want to think about what could happen if Alicia and he ever had a falling out. Marriage, particularly Family weddings, rarely lasted more than a few decades.

He scowled as the ground passed by under their aircar. He'd been brought up to know that he would have a partner chosen for him by his father, just to ensure that the Cicero Family remained prominent among the Thousand Families, who would be from a Family that needed to be aligned with his Family. The act of marriage, even if it had been in name only, would have altered the balance of power for a few years, before the tides changed and the balance altered again. Alicia wouldn't have been chosen for him, unless her Family somehow managed to develop something the Cicero Family needed; it would have been far more likely for him to marry someone like Kathy Tyler. Instead, he'd inherited the Headship and found himself choosing his own bride.

"Slightly," he said, as the small building appeared over the horizon. By long-standing agreement, the Imperial Register was neutral ground. The handful of people who ran it had no allegiance to any Clan or Family, choosing instead to remain out of the political struggle and remain above the fray. His father had once said that they were the only honest people on Earth, although he had added, in his deliberately cynical voice, that everyone had their price, or their breaking point. "Aren't you?"

The building rose up in front of them, a fairy-tale castle, built using the latest materials. It should have fallen crashing to the ground under its own weight, but the metal struts hidden under the shining stone held it in the air, despite looking too thin to hold up anything. The designer had allowed his imagination to run wild, creating a housing for the Register that looked magnificent, and yet slightly silly. Tiberius had wondered, when he had last seen the building, if that were the point. The entire concept was more than a little outdated.

They were greeted, as the aircar landed, by a woman wearing a monkish robe. "Welcome to the Register," she said, in a voice that was flat and devoid of all emotion. The custodians of the Imperial Register cared nothing for social graces, or even for the people they dealt with

every week. Her face, hidden within the robe, was almost impossible to see, while the shapeless robe robbed her of every trace of femininity. “Please follow me.”

She turned and led them into a darkened corridor. They followed, admiring the neatly-designed interior of the building, even if it seemed somehow unwelcoming to their eyes. Tiberius had seen some odd places before, buildings designed by children or spoilt trust fund brats, but the Imperial Register was just odd. If he hadn’t known better, he would have sworn that aliens had constructed it, rather than a human with an advanced knowledge of the human mind and a determination to ensure that no one lingered within his building. It wasn’t a place for the Families.

He scowled. The Imperial Register was the final court of appeal for the Thousand Families, the custodian of their past. The files stored within the fairytale castle could change lives or reshape the past, depending on who gained access to them. His DNA code had been stored at the Register when he’d been born, confirming him as the latest Cicero child, and again when he’d become the Clan’s Head. Every member of the Thousand Families had an entry in the Register, ranging from the legitimate children to the bastards and other accidents left in the wake of a Family member. A registered bastard child might not be in the line of succession, but a smart bastard could go far, using the Family line as a starting point. Some of them had made quite decent careers in the Imperial Navy, despite not having the right to carry the Family’s name. The only difference between them and Tiberius, he acknowledged, was that they had been born in the wrong place, to the wrong mother.

And Daria started out that way, he thought, with a flicker of grim amusement. He had wondered how his father had come to trust her and had finally realised, after spending weeks combing though the files, that Janice had been a Family bastard. Not from Cicero, which was almost a pity, but from a different Family. That hadn’t been common knowledge, not even to most of the Families, probably because her father had cut all ties with her after she had made herself Empress. It had been a unique revenge.

“You are here to link your codes and declare yourself man and wife,” the woman said. She hadn’t even shared her name with them. “Any children born of your body” — she nodded to Alicia — “will be regarded as the first tier of the Cicero Family, the Heirs to the Clan’s history, obligations and honours. You are to become a Cicero until you separate. Do you understand and accept the obligations inherent in this ceremony?”

“I do,” Alicia said. Her hand snuck into Tiberius’s hand. Her Family, being lesser, would be officially dead to her as long as she was

his wife. Her children, which she might have grown in a birthing vat rather than in her own womb, would be Cicero, rather than being part of her Family. It was the only way to keep the Families straight, but Tiberius knew that some Family Members were often torn between blood and obligations. It wasn't as if she was formally forbidden contact with her Family, but she was no longer theirs, not until they parted. "I do understand."

"Good," the monk said. They stepped suddenly into a lighted room. "You will be welcomed, I am sure."

Tiberius might have responded angrily to that remark — he hadn't realised how cynical the monkish guardians of the Imperial Register were — but the room distracted his attention. It was a massive room, large enough to hold hundreds of people, and it was almost entirely populated by holographic people. They moved around the room in a complicated dance, sometimes holding hands, sometimes standing alone, their movements perfectly choreographed. He sucked in his breath sharply as he recognised his father, looking as he had on the day when he married his mother, holding his mother's hand. He'd seen images of his father before, since the day that he'd died, but there was something uniquely *real* about the image facing him now.

"This is the core of the Imperial Register," the monk said, as the holograms parted to allow them to walk through the room and up to a single wooden desk. "The holograms represent the current state of play within the Families, each official relationship illuminated for all to see."

Tiberius shivered. "My parents are dead," he said, flatly. Anger was starting to push aside the butterflies in his stomach. The entire scene was hauntingly intimidating… and he didn't even understand why. "Why are they even here?"

"Your parents gave birth to you and the remainder of your siblings," the monk said, as they reached the desk. "As long as their bloodlines remain in play, we keep their images here, just to remind us of how the bloodlines interact."

"Bloodlines," Tiberius said, shaking his head. It was a delusion that he hadn't shared to any great extent — being born a junior son — but one that affected too many of the Families. It was the delusion that blood alone made them better than any of the commoners, that they had earned their positions merely by being born into a world of wealth and luxuries beyond the imagination of the commoners they ground underfoot, an asserted that things would never change. Things *had* changed. The rebellion had shattered the Families and their grip on power… and even if Daria's plan worked, they were still going to be weakened. "Why is this so important?"

“It is what we were trained to do,” the monk said, flatly. There was absolutely no doubt in her voice. “We are charged with keeping track of the different bloodlines so that Family-owned assets are treated properly, so that Family lines are not split — or, for that matter, cursed with the taint of incest. We are the final court of appeal for any Family union and our disapproval can prevent a wedding from occurring.”

Tiberius scowled. No one would say anything, aloud, if they married without the concurrence of the Imperial Register, but people would talk behind their backs, discussing the possible reasons for the marriage being rejected. It would weaken his position considerably and, far more, weaken the position of any of his children. They would find their right to being the Heir questioned, their positions weakened until they collapsed, placing someone else at the head of the Family. Gwendolyn and the other second-tier members wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of such weakness. How could they resist?

“Please stand before the desk,” the monk said, unaware of their thoughts. “The ceremony is brief and painless.”

The desk had a sense of *age* that was impossible to ignore, Tiberius realised, as they stepped onto the dais. It was simple, constructed from a fine wood that felt strange to the touch, holding only a massive paper manuscript and a single glowing globe. The monk stepped over to the other side and opened the manuscript, revealing names from long ago, written in a variety of different hands. There was no dust as she turned the pages, one by one, revealing names that had passed into legend, or in some cases into infamy.

Jason’s name will be in here somewhere, Tiberius said, remembering her father’s library. It would be impossible to hack into a paper volume, no matter how hard anyone tried. The monks guarded it jealously. Any discrepancies could be checked against the master copy. He felt unseen eyes watching them as pages turned, one by one, until she found a blank page.

“Tiberius Cicero, place your hand on the orb,” the monk ordered. It took him a moment to realise that she meant the globe. He placed his hand on it and the light brightened, just for an instant, before fading slightly. He saw a darkened image of his hand glowing on the sphere, before it faded away into the light. “Your identity is confirmed.”

Tiberius nodded. The worst nightmare of anyone from the Families was replacement, by a clone, or another Family Member, or even a computer hacker who managed to hack into one of the databases that the Imperial Register produced for the other worlds. The DNA coding, stored within the master system, would ensure that no substitutes could slip through the web and claim Family status.

There were hundreds of pretenders, every year, but most of them were weeded out fairly quickly. Some of them had even been invited to join High Society in their own right.

"Alicia, no longer of any Family, place your hand on the orb," the monk ordered. Alicia, effectively naked now without a Family, followed her instructions. "Your identity is confirmed."

The monk passed Tiberius a simple pen. "Write your name within the book," she ordered. Tiberius complied. Alicia, a moment later, followed him. "You are now lawfully united in matrimony until you choose to separate."

Tiberius smiled slightly. The whole ceremony still felt slightly ridiculous, but it would help keep some of the Family's more irritating members quiet, including the ones who had loudly wondered if he wasn't marrying beneath himself. They wouldn't have been happy with any choice, even the most advantageous match possible, simply because it would push them a step further away from the Headship. They would have no choice, now, but to honour Alicia as one of their own. That would gall them in so many ways…

"Thank you," Alicia said. She was Family now. He could have told her everything, but he couldn't take that risk, not yet. He hated thinking in such terms, but he had a responsibility to the Family. "May we leave here now?"

"Of course," the monk said, almost as if she couldn't wait to get rid of them. She probably couldn't. The Families weren't supposed to remain in the Imperial Register any longer than necessary. Who knew what someone with enough time and cunning might do with access to the master copy? "I shall escort you to your car."

They didn't speak until they were back in the aircar, flying away from the fairytale castle and heading back to Tiberius's estate. "You know," he said, only half in jest, "we could skip the wedding and move directly to the honeymoon."

Alicia elbowed him. "I think that my mother would be most disappointed if she didn't have a chance to watch me walking down the aisle," she said, firmly. "We can have the honeymoon right after that."

"Of course," Tiberius said, his thoughts returning to the wedding… and the awful deed that was going to be committed there. He wanted to order it stopped, now, but there was no choice. Daria had seen to that. They had to use the wedding as cover to assassinate Colin, regardless of his — or her — personal feelings. Alicia would never forget her wedding, even if it wouldn't be the happiest day of her life. He felt like a heel. He pasted a caring expression on his face. "I shall look forward to it."

* * *

"You look magnificent," Kathy said, as Cordova posed dramatically. It was easy, just once, to act the bubble-headed idiot. He *did* look good, wearing a uniform that put Grand Admiral Joseph Porter's famous uniform to shame, even if it had too much gold braid and medals for her taste. Cordova, at least, had earned most of his medals. Porter, who had died at the Battle of Earth, had obtained his through shameless servitude to the Thousand Families. "Will you keep the sword on for me?"

Cordova glared at her. "I look like a doorman at one of the hotels that are trying to move upmarket," he said, angrily, as he struggled with one of the fastenings. The uniform wasn't designed to be easy to get into without help, but he'd insisted on dressing himself. "If I ever meet the idiot who designed the Imperial Navy's uniforms, I'm going to challenge the bastard to a duel and gun him down without mercy."

"I think he died a few hundred years ago," Kathy said, tactlessly. Colin's reformations had included a new style of uniform for daily wear, but no one had had time to update the dress uniforms yet. With Admiral Wilhelm on the rampage, it wasn't something that anyone wanted to waste time upon. That hadn't stopped several officers from trying to find other ways to waste time. Colin had purged them from the Imperial Navy and not, in her view, a moment too soon. "I still think you look splendid."

"Perhaps I should go naked and claim I'm wearing traditional clothes from that nudist colony," Cordova said, as he studied his image in the reflecting mirror-field. "Perhaps I should not show up and claim that I'm dressed as the invisible man."

"Men," Kathy said, shaking her head again. Cordova did look spectacular, but the uniform was unwieldy, even without the ceremonial sword he wore at his hip. Kathy knew little about sword-fighting, but Cordova had assured her that no one in their right mind would wear a sword like that if they expected to be using it. She was one of only three people who knew that the sword *was* real… and that Tiberius expected Cordova to use it on his benefactor. "Are you sure that you're ready?"

Cordova scowled. Tiberius had tipped their hand, accidentally or otherwise, although she was still fairly sure that he hadn't realised that they'd taken what they knew to Colin. The wheels within wheels were still spinning and she wasn't sure how much anyone knew, even Colin himself. The plan was simple enough, but if it failed, they would end up carrying the blame for Colin's death.

Have Colin killed, but not by anyone, she thought, in a burst of surprising anger. She hadn't realised how much she'd cared until she'd

been forced to start making hard choices. She must have grown up a lot over the last few years. *Have him killed by one of his allies, so no one knows who to trust, and watch the Provisional Government come apart…*

"No," he said, with a touch of amusement. "I'm not ready, but we don't have any choice."

He looked down at his timepiece. "Twenty minutes until we have to depart for the Cicero Estate," he added, thoughtfully. One finger stroked part of his outfit and he winced. "Perhaps I should put on something more comfortable."

"Perhaps you should just stay as you are," Kathy said, firmly. She stepped up to him and gave him a hug. It had been far easier dressing herself, even though she tended to take longer to dress than he did, but she only needed to wear a dress. She'd wondered about buying a really expensive dress, but instead she'd chosen a basic dress. Style never went out of style, as her mother had once said. "If that… outrage against the human eye gets damaged, we won't have time to fix it."

Cordova shrugged. "And that's a problem?"

"Yes," Kathy said. She could sense his concern and, indeed, she shared it. He understood space combat. Fighting in a crowded room was asking for disaster. "If things start to go wrong together, we could end up dead."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"My God," Blondel Dupre breathed, as the aircar started to descend over the Cicero Estate. "Is this how they live all the time?"

Colin privately shared her awe, although he was much more practiced at keeping it from showing on his face. The Cicero Estate, quite literally, stretched away as far as the eye could see, hundreds of kilometres of land that belonged to the Clan, almost completely uninhabited apart from the Family Members, inhabiting their mansions that were small only in contrast to the massive building rising up ahead of them. The architect who had designed the building had combined several different styles into one whole that somehow managed to prevent a different appearance from each angle, keeping any outside observers confused. The building itself was massive, serving as both the home of the core of the Cicero Family and their headquarters. Colin had seen superdreadnaughts and command fortresses that were smaller.

Earth itself was largely uninhabited, a combination of a determined emigration policy and a draconian population control effort. The Federation had believed, or claimed to believe, that there had been too many people on Earth and had been quite ruthless in encouraging as many people to leave as possible, even to the point of enforcing a one-child policy on every human living on Earth. The Empire had taken advantage of the policy and, over the thousand years of its existence, had completely depopulated Earth, apart from their own people. It was the home of the Thousand Families, although Tiberius had once told him that there were still rumours of feral humans living in the wildness away from all settlement. The remains of the older cities had been razed to the ground centuries ago. No one knew if there were really rogue humans out there.

He cast his gaze over the endless swarm of incoming aircars and muttered a curse under his breath. He hadn't realised, not really, just how many people would be coming to Tiberius's wedding; after all, he had invited all of the Thousand Families, and as many of the real movers and shakers as he could. The MPs had been invited as a body, although Colin had heard that only a third of them were going to attend, while several of the Families that disliked Cicero had refused to send more than token representation. Colin would have been happier if Blondel hadn't been accompanying him, but there was no way to avoid inviting the Empire's Prime Minister. He hadn't even had time to warn her about the possibility — the near-certainty — that someone would make an attempt on his life.

Her face was darker than he'd expected when he looked at her.

He could guess at her thoughts. The men and women who owned such vast estates — the Cicero Estate wasn't even the largest on the planet — had torn Macore, her homeworld, apart, just to add a few extra megacredits to their holdings. It wouldn't even have saved the Empire, or delayed economic collapse for any time at all; if Kathy was right, only the most draconian of measures would save the Empire, and looting a tiny economy was actually counter-productive. It hadn't been a necessary evil. It had been a cold, petty and banal evil.

Macore would have had a simpler way of dealing with Tiberius as well. A suspect in a crime, any crime, would be interrogated under a lie detector. If found innocent, he would be freed at once, while if found guilty he could be tried and sentenced. The Empire had had similar policies, but someone of Tiberius's rank would have been immune merely because of his name, even if he committed the most vile crimes imaginable. The Thousand Families were long used to burying their mistakes, sweeping their outcasts and criminals under the carpet, those who had shocked the hardened governors of high society. It would have to be serious for anyone even to care, let alone cutting the culprit dead in the streets. In order to get the proof, inarguable proof, that he needed, he had to expose his back to a sword wielded by one of his closest allies. He would have laughed under other circumstances.

"They made this world into their palace," he agreed, as the aircar dropped neatly to the ground in front of the main entrance. Flower girls, wearing outfits that left absolutely nothing to the imagination, greeted them at once, inviting them to enter the building and treat it as their own home. Judging from the number of MPs that were already surrounding the buffet, the invitation was being accepted by almost everyone. "Shall we enter?"

Colin had grown up in a fairly middle-class home on one of the second-rank worlds. It hadn't been an easy life, but it hadn't been a hard one, and it wasn't unknown for some of the inhabitants to make something of themselves, provided that they escaped being noticed by the governors. His family had always had to work to put food on the table, however, and he'd been used to working from a very early age… but looking into the entrance hall was like looking into a different world. The men and women who ran the Empire, or used to run the Empire, wanted for nothing and it showed.

The entrance hall would have outshone the greatest hall on his homeworld. Everywhere he looked, he could see men and women having a good time, carefree and wanting for nothing, although he could see some of them looking around to ensure that no one else was having a better time. As he studied them, refusing to be pushed along by the flower girls, he saw signs that all was not right. Some of the

men were desperate, trying hard to convince themselves that they belonged her, laughing too loudly at every little incident. Some of their dates were growing heartily sick of them and were already looking for other meal tickets, while the men and women of the most important Families swept by with their noses in the air. Some of the snubbed guests, looked down upon by those whose support they needed, retreated to the corners to remain outside public view. Others glared back, daring the secret masters of high society to try to put them in their place, testing the real strength of their former patrons.

He shook his head finally. They were all crazy. Their world had turned upside down when his starships had battered through the defences of Earth and forced a surrender. Even if Tiberius's plan worked and he was killed, they would only be delivering the Empire into Admiral Wilhelm's hands, not recovering it for themselves. The handful of Family Members who were competent and capable of doing what needed to be done — Kathy and Tiberius, among others — would be buried by the others, just for telling them that they needed to cut back.

No wonder Mars is angry, he thought, as their escort finally managed to urge them on into the next room. It would have been… unseemly for the Thousand Families to grow their own food, or tend their own animals, regardless of the advantages of such a step. They could have fed an entire planet without ever having to see a farm, but that wasn't good enough for them. They had, instead, turned Mars into the main supplier of food and drink for Earth, at astonishing expense. Prices, he'd heard, had more than tripled after the rebellion, but it wasn't as if there were many other places to sell it. Most planets could grow their own food easily. To give the Empire its due, they had generally insured that most planets could feed themselves. Mars had a captive market, but it was one that cut both ways.

The next room was a monstrous swimming room, with two massive swimming pools, dozens of hot tubs and even a sauna field, holding enough steam inside to warm a hundred people. The swimming pools were full of bright young things, men and women showing off their perfect bodies — the result of cosmetic adjustment to fit the latest styles — in hopes of being noticed by those higher up, or someone who just wanted a fling. Only a handful of the women in the pool wore costumes, he noted with a flush of slight embarrassment; they swam naked as if they didn't have a care in the world. The flower girl hurried them through the swimming room and directly into the next room, an internal garden with plants and flowers from all over the Empire.

Colin found himself becoming dazed as they walked through room after room. It was unbelievable wealth, completely wasted on

nothing, but entertainment. There were so few people outside the Thousand Families — and even the merest of the Thousand Families was unimaginably wealthy — who could have afford such a display, even if they had wanted to make such an unnecessary display of wealth. It was like one of the illegal computer simulations he had played with as a child, one where the player had unlimited funds and could do whatever he pleased, pretending to be one of the charmed inner circle. The lifestyle of the Thousand Families was a matter of rumour, but rumour hadn't even touched the true scale of their wealth, or how they used it.

The reporters are going to have a field day, he thought, as they passed into yet another room. He had lost track of how far they'd gone into the massive building, which might have been the point. They could have gone right into the building, or they might not even have left the entrance region, rather than seeing the inner heart of the Family. The reporters, once they told the Empire just what kind of luxury the Thousand Families enjoyed, would unleash a storm.

"This is the main reception room," the flower girl said finally, with a curtsey. They found themselves at the top of a long series of stairs, leading down into a swarm of people, the real movers and shakers of the Empire. Colin spotted Gwendolyn Cicero and a handful of others holding court, while Jason Cordova, resplendent in his Admiral's uniform, was lecturing a crowd of young boys on space combat tactics. Colin's eyes flickered, almost involuntarily, to the sword on Cordova's belt…

I'm an idiot, he thought, without heat. Oddly, it almost felt good to be finally taking a step forward, even if it was an insanely risky one. One way or the other, the question of who run the Empire — and whose reform program would go into effect — would be settled at the wedding.

"President Colin Harper, Admiral of the Shadow Fleet, and Prime Minister and First Among Equals Blondel Dupre," the master of ceremonies thundered, as they started to descend the steps. The crowd glanced up at them, took in their faces and uniforms, and pasted expressions of welcome on their faces. Colin, who had plenty of experience with people who were trying to convince him that they liked him, could see the truth. Only a handful of men and women in the room, mainly representatives from the smaller Families, were pleased to see him. The remainder hated him for shattering their world. "Give them due honour, as they deserve."

Colin had half-expected to find themselves talking to no one, but Kathy Tyler, wearing a simple blue dress that looked stunning on her figure, brought them into a discussion with a pair of representatives from junior Families. Colin listened with half an ear at first — most

Family representatives were unimpressive — but as they continued to talk, he found himself paying more attention. A plan to continue democratising their workforces and paying more wages, as well as chances for proper advancement, was certainly worth advancing.

Blondel added her own comments as the discussion became more detailed. The Empire's normal tactic for striking workers had been to turn the SDs on them, but without the SDs the workers had started to take over entire industries, which started to damage the already-frail economy. The workers didn't think that they had much to lose, but the truth was that altering the economy had to be done carefully, or all would suffer. The plan to improve conditions and to ensure that competence was rewarded with advancement was effectively giving the workers what they had already, but if it was used carefully, the workers might acquire the working habits of the first-rank worlds. They, at least, had not forgotten how to be competitive.

A dull rumble of drums brought them all to attention, facing the small dais in the centre of the room. Colin had wondered how they were going to fit all of the thousands of guests into the main room, but it appeared that most of them were not going to be watching the wedding directly, but would be viewing it from their positions. Tiberius entered from one side of the room, walking alone and wearing a simple black suit, looking neither left nor right as he reached the dais. For a man who had decided to use his wedding as a chance to commit murder, Colin decided, he was looking remarkably calm. He'd seen Admirals facing an easy victory who'd looked more concerned.

Lord Roosevelt took the stand and faced the audience. Colin had been surprised to encounter a new Lord Roosevelt — it had been unlikely that anyone would actually want the job — and had looked into his background, only to discover that he was barely related to Stacy Roosevelt. He had been fifth-tier, almost certain never to inherit the headship, until the poisoned chalice that the Roosevelt Family and Clan had become was passed to him.

Poor bastard, Colin thought, dryly. In Lord Roosevelt's place, he would have given serious thought to changing his name and taking the next ship out to the Rim with as much loot as he could carry. The Roosevelt Clan had no future now. Its clients had deserted it even before the Fall of Earth, it's industries had been taken by the rebels and used to fight the war. They had nothing left to keep them alive.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate the wedding of two of our number," Lord Roosevelt intoned, as if it were the merest Family Member who was getting married. Colin found himself wondering if Tiberius was insulted, or if he was too busy concentrating on remaining calm to care. "Lord Tiberius Cicero will welcome Alicia into

his Family…”

He droned on for nearly ten minutes before finally halting and looking down towards the entrance. Colin followed his gaze to see four of the flower girls leading the way, followed by Alicia, wearing a white dress that shone like the sun. She was followed by two other bridesmaids, holding her train, both of whom looked nervous. Kathy had told him, back before the wedding, that being bridesmaids was a honour that was impossible to decline, but it involved long formal dances and routines that killed any of the enjoyment from the ceremony. She’d been a bridesmaid once and had hated it.

Alicia looked utterly spectacular in her dress, cut to show just a hint of cleavage, as she stepped up onto the dais. She was a tall willowy blonde, with her hair coming down in straight waves, and even without cosmetics she looked stunning. Tiberius was a lucky man, Colin decided, even if their wedding was probably doomed from the start. Kathy had also said that most family weddings barely lasted more than a decade, although a handful did remain strong until one of the partners died. If he hadn’t known that Cordova had been ordered to kill him in public, he might even have enjoyed himself.

“Do you, Alicia, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?” Lord Roosevelt demanded. Colin wondered, absently, how he must be feeling. His Clan was a becalmed hulk, taking fire from enemies as they gathered around, while Tiberius’s Clan still looked strong. “Do you choose to wed with him, to have his children, to bring honour and joy to his Family? Speak now, or forever hold your tongue.”

Colin rolled his eyes at the overdone nature of the ceremony. The wedding had, as he understood it, been formalised when the Imperial Register had given them its blessing. The entire ceremony wasn’t really needed for anything beyond showing off the Family’s wealth and, of course, introducing Alicia to the core of high society as the Cicero’s wife. It was, in some ways, a greater change in her status than anything that Colin himself had endured.

“I do,” she said, calmly. Her voice had been tuned perfectly for the gathering. It was firm, yet soft and warm. It echoed perfectly around the room. “I take him to my heart and soul.”

“Good,” Lord Roosevelt said. He leaned forward. If he saw any irony in his position, he didn’t show it. “You may join hands.”

Tiberius held out a hand. After a moment, Alicia took it. “I join thee now as man and wife,” Lord Roosevelt said, as he wrapped a silken cord around their wrists, symbolising their joining. It was a ritual that had endured for over a thousand years, used by most of the colony worlds. “You may now kiss the bride.”

They kissed. The room burst into cheers.

Colin felt his timepiece buzz. It was almost time. The crowd was moving forward now, advancing on the bride and groom to wish them the best of luck, but he could sense, now, that something wasn't quite right. Something had changed in the room.

"No," Cordova shouted, from behind him. Colin started, pushing Blondel away before she could react, as he turned to face the parting crowds. Cordova was moving forward incredibly fast, his sword already in his hand. It glinted madly in the light, Colin saw, feeling his mind reel. He wasn't used to up close and personal combat. "You won't…"

The sword flashed once, aimed at Colin's chest…

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Cordova brought the sword down hard… and it shattered on the body armour Colin had woven into his uniform, as planned. The blow still hurt and he found himself staggering backwards, barely aware of the press of the crowd as everyone struggled to get away from the murder scene, or to get towards it to find out what was going on. He dropped to one knee, one hand scrabbling for the pistol he wore on his belt as panic spread everywhere.

"Get down," someone shouted. The alert signal had brought his bodyguards into the room from the adjoining rooms. It had been simple enough to have Marines inserted into the guest lists; after all, there were so many commoners on everyone's invitation lists these days. Tiberius had invited everyone who was anyone, too many people for him to know and vet them all, and it had been easy to include a few unexpected guests. Even unarmed, Colin would have backed them against a legion of Household Troops, but they'd been able to slip weapons into the mansion. "Everyone get down on the ground and stay down…"

A burst of light, hot enough to singe Colin's hair, burned past his ear as he hurled himself to the floor. A woman wearing a long flowing blue dress had opened fire on him with an energy weapon. A Marine shot her with a stunner, but she remained on her feet, weaving drunkenly towards Colin's position. Her headscarf fell away, revealing a tattoo just above her left eye and confirming her identity. She was a pleasure slave. An *armed* pleasure slave.

If I get out of this alive, Colin thought, taking aim at her with his pistol, *I will have every pleasure slave on Earth removed for their own safety*.

The Marine fired again and this time the girl's head disintegrated into a shower of blood. Colin heard the screams from the innocents lying on the floor, some of them trying to block the entire unpleasant scene from their eyes, others enjoying the chaos with the delight of people who *knew* that it would never touch them. So few of the Thousand Families had ever wanted for anything material, or even seen violence up close and personal, but now it had touched them right in the heart of their power. The old Empire was dead.

"Sir, stay down," the Marine snapped. Ben, Colin recalled. His name was Ben, one of the Marines who'd served on the *Lightning* before the first mutinies. "The entire complex is under attack."

Colin swore as the noise of fighting and screams started to impact on his ears. The entire reception room had disintegrated into a mass of people, lying on the floor and groaning, even as a pair of Marines

escorted Cordova to a safer area on the other side of the room. No one would doubt, now, that he had tried to kill Colin, or that Tiberius had been involved. Only Tiberius could have cleared him to get such a weapon through the security sensors, more than enough rope to hang him and his entire Family with… assuming that they survived the next few hours. The sounds from outside the room didn't sound encouraging.

"Sada, Miguel, guard the doors," Ben snapped, as the other Marines entered. The sound of fighting was growing louder, or was it a simple massacre? How many had brought weapons to the wedding. "Sir, the pleasure slaves have gone mad; they're killing everyone."

Colin nodded. Cicero made pleasure slaves, growing them in vats deep below their estate… and there were thousands of them. He could see now, in hindsight, how the trick had been done. Cicero had taken pleasure slaves, implanted the knowledge of how to use weapons into their heads, and then sent them out to kill. They would be pathetic against trained and experienced soldiers, or even SD Troopers, but against unarmed men and women? They'd kill thousands before they were brought down.

He coughed, feeling dust catching in his mouth as it shivered down from the ceiling. The building rocked to the force of a massive explosion, too close for comfort. The hundreds of aristocrats who had expected a wedding followed by all the food they could eat whimpered, scared to death for their first time in their lives, even if they couldn't decide if they were more unsure of their fellows or Colin himself. The handful of Marines couldn't hold the room forever.

"I take it that you called for help at once," he said, finally. They'd taken the precaution of stationing a fully armed reaction force near the estate, if too far away to intervene as soon as the shit hit the fan. "What's their ETA?"

"Five minutes," Ben said. Another explosion rocked the building. "I don't think that we should stay here, but I took a tour of the building while I was being patronised by the aristocrats and there's no cover outside this room. If we slip out the door, we will be trapped and killed; they're killing everyone they find."

Colin nodded slowly. As assassination plans went, it wasn't the best he'd ever heard of, let alone seen in action, but it might still work. It just didn't make sense, however, no matter how much he considered the variables. Tiberius had wanted him killed publicly, ensuring that there was no doubt that Jason Cordova was the murderer, but how the hell did he plan to avoid getting some of the blame himself?

"Find Tiberius," he snapped. A quick check of the room revealed that Tiberius was gone, but Alicia was lying on the ground, her white

dress burned badly by a plasma bolt. She'd been shot down deliberately, Colin saw, and it was already too late to do anything for her. Had Tiberius planned her death, or was some other player at work? Had someone from the Cicero Clan stuck a knife in his or her leader's back, even as Tiberius stuck a knife in Colin's own back? "Why…?"

The room shook again. "Sir, they're trying to break in through the main doors," Ben said, grimly. "I think that we'd better start preparing some blockades."

Colin watched as the Marines went to work, co-opting people to help from the handful who seemed to be dealing with the shock and trauma. It wasn't something he'd expected to see, but he'd fought in space, when he'd understood how combat worked. He'd never fought hand-to-hand, or killed more than one person with his own hands, and it was an introduction to a whole new world. He glanced down at his timepiece and swore again. By the time the Marines arrived to liberate the handful of survivors, Tiberius could be halfway across the planet, or heading out into space.

* * *

Tiberius didn't know how he was still moving through the concealed tunnel. He'd barely had a second to realise that the pleasure slave, the second line of attack if Cordova failed them, was taking aim at him before Alicia had shoved him out of the way. It hadn't saved her from taking a shot to the chest and he had known, the instant he saw the wounds, that she was dead. The man who'd shot the pleasure slave, trying to clear some room in the formal hall, had saved his life, but somehow Tiberius knew that it had been a coincidence. Daria had intended to kill him.

The tunnel had been carefully concealed. Daria had assured him — although he was starting to lose faith in what she told him — that the tunnel was invisible to anyone without the latest sensors. The only proof that she was telling the truth had been a lack of anyone following him, but as he crawled further, he keyed his implant to access the estates internal security systems and realised that Daria's plans went far further than she'd told him. All over the estate, the pleasure slaves were revolting, killing men, women and children with a chilling dispassion for lives. They were, after all, just following their programming.

He cursed himself for a fool as he forced himself onwards, trying to reach the command centre. There was almost no one apart from the handful of remaining guards who was armed… and he would have bet

half of his entire holdings that they'd all been suborned by Daria before she started operating to reclaim the Empire. He thought, seriously, about trying to make his way to the spaceport and using a shuttle to reach the yacht in orbit, but somehow he was sure that that way out would be blocked as well. Pleasure slaves might not think, in any sense that a human would understand the term, but Daria had commanded men and ships in action. She would be quite capable of identifying every possible angle of escape and countering it. She had, after all, had advance warning of the crisis.

The corridor terminated in the interior of the mansion, deep within the private quarters that belonged to the inner circle of the Family. He remembered, with a growing sense of shame and guilt, that he'd brought Alicia here once, despite the disapproval of some of the Family, just to show her his rooms. He'd slept with her then, before the end of the war and the Fall of Earth, and he had led her to her death as effectively as any Judas goat. She'd been bright and full of life and he'd taken it all away from her, just because he had wanted to save his own miserable life. He staggered along the corridor, wishing desperately that he'd thought to provide himself with a weapon, but he'd always had men and women ready to risk their lives in his defence. A Family Head shouldn't carry a weapon, his father had said, and he had followed it to the death. Daria had even encouraged him in that belief.

He reached the control room and peered inside. Daria was sitting in a chair, holding a single weapon on her lap, watching as the display showed images from inside the mansion. She looked up at him, saw him, and beckoned him inside imperiously. He came, helplessly, and knew that he would have come even without the weapon in her hand. He was seeing the true Daria now, the hidden truth behind the mask she'd worn for Colin and the other rebels, and it chilled him to the bone. His father had backed a sociopath to reform the Empire. He hadn't had time to regret his mistake.

"You lied to me," he said, between gasps. The screens were showing scenes of horror spreading through the mansion. Pleasure slaves killed robotically as they advanced through rooms that should have been safe. He saw a naked girl, her face chillingly blank, picking up children and snapping their necks, one by one. How many of the Empire's elite had attended the wedding ceremony? How many of them were now dead or trapped without hope of escape. "Why?"

Daria smiled. The building shuddered again as the display switched to an outside view. Marine landing craft were racing towards the estate, ducking and weaving to avoid fire from ground-based weapons while firing back with HVMs of their own. It would take them time to clear their way into the estate, Tiberius realised, and by

the time they fought their way to the reception area, almost everyone would be dead.

"Why not?" Daria asked, her mask slipping back into place. The bloody scenes of carnage seemed nothing, but a mere distraction. "Why should I not purge the Empire of all who would oppose me?"

Tiberius found himself gasping for breath. "Why?" He pleaded. "You're killing us all."

"I was born to one of the Thousand Families on the wrong side of the sheets," Daria said, calmly. There was a mocking undertone in her voice, a hint of cold amusement at how events had played out. "I was never wanted anywhere and so my father sent me into the Imperial Navy, just to get rid of me. I was his little embarrassment, you see, someone he couldn't disown, but also someone he couldn't accept. I hope that you used birth control when you started to sow your wild oats, my dear."

Her voice had become openly mocking. "I cut my way to the top through sheer brilliance and a complete lack of concern for anyone else," she continued. "I hit the glass ceiling, of course, just as Colin himself hit it, but I had allies. Your father, among others, wanted to reform the Empire, and so they picked harmless little Janice as their Empress. They might as well have given the fox the keys to the henhouse."

Tiberius stared at her. "But you wanted to reform the Empire," he protested. "They wanted you to begin a reform program…"

"Of course they did," Daria agreed, "and so do I. They taught me to imagine how things could be changed. I imagined a universe without the Thousand Families."

She laughed. "How many of your kin will die together?"

The building shook again. On the display, armoured Marines were pouring out of their landing craft and flowing — too late — into the building. Tiberius knew a moment of hope, even though he knew whatever remained of the Provisional Government would blame him for the massacre. There was nowhere left for him now. The Marines might as well shoot him and get it over with.

Daria read his thoughts. "Yes," she agreed. "They're not coming to save you, Tiberius."

She levelled the gun directly at his head. He flinched, trying to leap out the way, but it was too late. The gun barked once, there was a brief stabbing pain in his head… and then nothing. Nothing, but darkness.

* * *

“Forward, at the double,” General Neil Frandsen snapped, as he led the Marine Company into the Cicero Mansion. He shouldn’t have been anywhere near the action, or so his subordinates had argued, but there was no way he was going to leave his superior and friend in the midst of danger. The battle armour made short work of the main entrance and he crashed through into the first reception hall, into a scene of horror. Dead bodies, men and women, young and old, lay everywhere, their bodies wracked with deadly wounds. None of them had had a chance.

“Disruptor wounds,” one of the Marines noted, as they moved quickly through the building. Frandsen could only nod in agreement. Disrupters had been banned for centuries — although Imperial Intelligence and the SDs had been known to use them as terror weapons — because they not only killed, they killed people in terrible agony. Whoever had planned the massacre wanted the dead to *suffer*. *No one* would use a disruptor in cold blood. “Sir, movement…”

Frandsen’s visor lit up as the first hostile came into view. For a moment, his gaze focused on the perfect naked body, and then warning tones sounded as the suit’s sensors took in the disruptor in her hand. She fired a single green burst of light at him that the suit countered, before one of the Marines neatly put a bullet through her forehead. Her dead expression, utterly unmoved by what she’d been doing and what the Marines had done to her, haunted him as others, their faces as expressionless as hers, appeared from the side corridors. The Marines tried to get them to surrender, but it was useless. They didn’t even hear their words before they were shot down.

The teams split up as they advanced further into the building, powered armour smashing through walls and floors as they moved towards their fellows. Colin was still alive, Frandsen hoped desperately, but if they were under siege… Whoever had planned the massacre had been clever, he acknowledged without particular heat, but they didn’t have effective tools. A group of Marines would have conducted a mobile defence. The defenders, whatever they were, merely hurled themselves on the Marines, trying to bring them down by sheer weight of numbers. Against powered combat armour, that was a losing game, one that could only result in a slaughter. Blood spilled everywhere as they pushed their way further into the building…

“We’re coming,” he said, keying his transmitter. If Colin didn’t have at least a pair of Marines with him, he was probably dead. The pleasure slaves, or whatever the hell they were, had formed a ring around the main hall, one that was defended by heavy weapons. He led his team around the defenders and punched them out as quickly as he could. “Colin, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Neil,” Colin said, finally. “I don’t know how long the doors will hold out, but we’ll hold as long as possible…”

The signal cut off sharply.

* * *

Pushed and prodded by the Marines, and Cordova, who had been released on the grounds that it no longer mattered what anyone thought, the trapped men and women had built a formidable barrier using every piece of furniture in the room. Colin didn’t have any illusions about how long it would last if the pleasure slaves brought up heavy weapons, however, and ordered as many people as possible to crouch away from the doors. A moment after they made contact with the advancing Marines, the doors blew open into dust and the pleasure slaves started their advance.

Zombies, Colin thought coldly, as he took careful aim with his pistol. He’d offered it to Ben, but the Marine had told him to keep it. He might need a final bullet for himself. The pleasure slaves looked like conditioned slaves, the brain-burned men and women who were used for brute labour on some of the less-developed worlds, but there was no mistaking the weapons in their hands, or their deadly intent. They opened fire, almost at random, and people died. He took aim and started to knock them down, one by one, along with the Marines, but there were always more pleasure slaves to replace the ones that were killed. They literally didn’t care how many they lost…

And then a sweep of plasma fire cut the remainder down. A massive figure in black armour appeared, sweeping the handful of survivors out of existence, before lumbering forward to stand in front of Colin’s position. A hand opened a helmet and Frandsen stared down at him.

“For God’s sake, Colin,” he said. “Don’t do that to me again.”

“Never mind that now,” Colin snapped. “Find Tiberius!”

Chapter Forty

Daria ran.

She'd known, the minute that the Marines crashed into the estate, that the game was up. The odds still favoured Colin's death, but there would no longer be any chance to place the blame for the disaster and the massacre on Cordova. That part of the plan had always been the weakest part and, evidently, Colin had managed to break it. The presence of his bodyguards had ensured that he would survive long enough for the truth to emerge. It was time to leave. She ran along darkened corridors, trusting in her hidden inserts to help guide her though corridors she barely knew, while listening to the Marine chatter through their communications systems. They would make their way directly to Colin's position and save him, if they could.

And then the game would be up. Daria knew Colin well enough to know that he would never be satisfied with any pat explanation that blamed everything on Tiberius. There was no logical reason for the massacre under that explanation. Tiberius hadn't even had the slightest idea that Daria intended to take his assassination plot and turn it into a bloody slaughter that would remove most of the other possible sources of opposition. Here and there, scattered through the estate, were Family heads, MPs and even commoners seeking advancement into the post-rebellion Empire. Tiberius, if nothing else, would never have sanctioned the slaughter of his own Family.

She concentrated on a code in her head as she reached the lower levels of the estate, passing through a security door that could have stood off a nuclear blast, before racing further down the corridors into the assembly lines. Colin's decision to order the disbandment of most of the Household Troops, ironically, had come back to haunt him. Tiberius's old guards would have known to prevent her from entering the very heart of the Family's power, but now it was too late. It was time to improvise again.

A smile crossed her lips as she finally reached the core of the Cicero Family, the vast computers that protected the Family's secrets, and threw herself into a chair. It was the work of a moment to bring up the main computer network, which was under attack from several Marine computers, and crash it. It would be useless to her now, but it would also be useless to the Marines, who would have to search the estate section by section, a monumental task under the best of circumstances. By the time they found Tiberius's body — she silently cursed the shortage of time, for she would have preferred to vaporise it — she would be well away from the estate and climbing into space.

Time to leave, she thought, and headed down a long flight of stairs

into the underground transport system. The Cicero Family had established their own network of transports for moving between the different parts of their estate, hidden from all outside observers, even the Empress. Daria would never have known about them if Tiberius's father, eager to convince her that the Clan could keep secrets, had shown her the system one day, years before Tiberius had been born. The secret would serve her well this day.

She hadn't planned perfectly, she admitted to herself, but there had been no choice. Her study of the Imperial Navy, back when she'd been an Admiral, had shown her the weakness of too much prior planning… and how many Admirals, Generals and bureaucrats had ridden their plans down to ruin, rather than admit that the plan was failing, or even flat-out wrong. She couldn't have planned her return so spectacularly from the Rim, or even predicted Colin and his rebellion, but she had prepared possibilities she could use to improvise. There were people in high places, backdoors into all kinds of systems and all kinds elements that she could use to further her aims. The old thrill was back. Her very life would depend on what she did next. The game was far from over.

The small transport capsule was waiting in the tiny station when she entered, already primed to depart by the state of emergency. Red lights were flickering everywhere, casting the small station into a morass of shadows and eerie patches of darkness, but she ignored the lighting. The system was heavily supported and completely disconnected from the estate's main system. It shouldn't fail unless the Marines somehow cut the power to the whole planet. She climbed into one of the capsules and issued a simple command.

"Port Haven, now."

There was a slight sense of acceleration as the capsule rocketed off into the tunnels, accelerating at a speed that would have squashed her back into the seat, if the compensators hadn't been working. The entire system, she reflected, must have cost the Cicero Family more money than she cared to think about, while it was used so rarely, just to keep it a secret. There were worlds out there in the Empire that could have used such a system to develop their economic systems, but instead they were built for the rich and famous, who didn't need them. It was something she had determined to change back when she'd been Empress… and, when she reclaimed her throne, she would change it. The sources of opposition, one by one, were being removed.

Port Haven stood on the coast, staring out towards an island that had once been called Britain, home of the McDonald and Hanover Families. The Cicero had built a small retreat there, one that happened to be very small by the standards of the Thousand Families — but still large enough to host over a hundred people in reasonable comfort —

that he had used as a getaway estate. Daria, a few months ago, had taken the precaution of adding a shuttle to the small collection of old-fashioned air and space craft that Tiberius's ancestors had assembled. She'd also rigged the IFF. No matter what alerts had been sent out from the Marines, the orbital defences would not seek to shoot her down, or force her to surrender. They would barely know that she was there.

There was still no time to lose. The shuttle's systems were military-grade and they came online as soon as she keyed her code into the hatch and scrambled into the pilot's seat, bringing up the flight program with a single command into the computers. She could have flown the shuttle herself, easily, but she didn't have time to work out a proper program and nothing attracted attention like a shuttle without a proper flight plan. It was easy for experienced officers to tell the difference between the two states and if they decided to be officious, her plans would come crashing down in ruins.

She leaned back in her chair as the shuttle's drive fields came online and the craft climbed for space. It wouldn't be a long flight to the Moon, where she would pick up a small Freebooter starship that had been left there, waiting for her. Joshua and his fleet were bare hours from Earth… and, when Admiral Wilhelm attacked, she would be there to pick up the pieces. The game was *far* from over.

* * *

"Spread out," Frandsen ordered, through his armour. "I want this entire blasted place mapped and searched. Anyone you find, cuff them and put them on the lawn. Move!"

He looked down at Colin, who had insisted on accompanying the Marines. Frandsen had tried to talk him out of it, but Colin had decided that he wanted to stay in the building under Tiberius was found, and it had proven impossible to dissuade him. Colin was now surrounded by a trio of armed Marines who eyed everyone near him cautiously and looked ready to commit bloody mayhem on anyone who stepped over the line and got too close. Frandsen, who would have preferred him on one of the *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts, had issued orders that if they ran into serious trouble, Colin was to be dragged out of the building rather than left exposed to serious danger.

The interior of the building was deathly quiet now. The Marines advanced cautiously, shining lights into rooms where the lighting had failed, along with most of the power. Someone had crashed the estates computers, rendering it impossible for the Marines to hack the systems

from outside, although Frandsen suspected that it would be impossible to do so anyway. The Cicero Family had had access to the latest systems from their research labs, years before the Imperial Navy had ever seen them deployed, and their computers were *seriously* protected. Without support, without even a chart of the interior of the building, they were blind. They had to search the massive estate room by room.

He cursed as the internal HUD on his armour's visor updated again. The Marine combat suits were sharing their sensor readings, allowing the Marines to build up a picture of the interior, but it was slow going. The entire building seemed to be full of bodies, from men and women who had died quickly and fairly cleanly to people who had died in screaming agony. The highest of the Thousand Families and the lowest of the low had died together. Death was very democratic.

"The pleasure slaves seem to be dying," one of the Marines sent. The bursts of actual fighting — he had carefully steered Colin away from any known centres of enemy activity — were dying down as the pleasure slaves collapsed. There seemed to be no reason for their deaths, not even wounds or poison, but they were dying. Their faces remained chillingly dispassionate as they dropped to the ground and lay still. "Sir, we found seven survivors here, barricaded in a room."

"Get them out onto the lawn," Frandsen sent back, and left it. Marines weren't SD Troopers or even enlisted men, although *those* stereotypes had been falling ever since Colin and Joshua had started reforming the Imperial Navy. The Shadow Fleet had always had a high percentage of mustangs, while the pre-revolution Imperial Navy had almost none. He could trust his men and women to handle the prisoners without further ado. "I wonder if…"

They turned into a new section before he could finish, revealing a very different layout. He knew, without thinking, that they had stumbled across the heart of the building, the nerve centre of the Cicero Family. There were fewer bodies here, mostly a handful of conditioned servants, but most of the servants would have been pleasure slaves. Whatever Tiberius had done to reprogram them and turn them into mindless killers had clearly been terrifyingly strong. He didn't even know *how* he had slipped an assassin through the Roosevelt's Clan's security scans — and *no one* would have allowed a pleasure slave into their apartments without the most through scans imaginable — but it had worrying implications. What if ordinary men and women could be conditioned in the same way?

"Shit," someone said, as they checked out a massive room. There was only one body there, a small child. It was a girl of barely seven years. Her throat had been torn open by superhuman strength. "Sir…"

“Focus,” Frandsen barked. He had seen the aftermath of pirate raids that had been cleaner and less horrific. “Check out the next room and…”

“We found Tiberius,” the point team sent. “Sir, he’s dead.”

* * *

Colin had half-expected to find Tiberius hiding somewhere within his estate. He’d decided to remain with the Marines, despite Frandsen’s increasingly urgent pleas and warnings, because he wanted to talk with Tiberius before they moved him to a detention centre, but there would be no information from Tiberius now. His body had two neat bullet holes, one through his chest and the other through his head. There was no question that he was dead. It might have been possible, with the prompt use of a stasis tube and a Imperial-grade medical centre, to save him if it had been attempted at once, but the body had been alone too long.

“A standard Thumper-XXI,” Frandsen said, softly. Colin was impressed. He’d been taught to use weapons in the Academy, but he couldn’t have named the weapon used to kill Tiberius without a full analysis. Frandsen sounded inhumanly confident. “It might have been something simpler, or older, but I suspect it was most likely a Thumper. The bullets went through the body and swelled up inside, ensuring certain death. Either of the two bullet wounds would have provided enough shock and trauma to kill him.”

He looked down at Colin. “You don’t have to be here now,” he said, seriously. “You could go back to the landing craft and get transport back to the High City.”

Colin shook his head. He had barely thought about the implications, but the more he considered what had happened as he calmed down, the odder it seemed. He could understand Tiberius trying to assassinate him and even sending a friend to carry out the deed, but why the massacre? Why slaughter thousands of people, including many of the members of his own Family, just to get at Colin. If the aim had been to destroy the government, it might have succeeded… hell, he wasn’t sure if he had a government any longer. How many of the MPs had attended the wedding? How many of them had survived?

The task of reforming the government seemed hopeless.

“Check around the area,” he ordered, knowing that Frandsen would already have seen to it. Hundreds of Marines had arrived and were spreading through the building. If there were any more survivors, they would be found and escorted out to the lawn, where

they would wait until their role in events could be established. Many of them would be traumatised and shocked, but there was nothing that Colin could do for them. Earth hadn't seen a bloody massacre since the last time humans had fought humans on the surface of their homeworld. The Dathi had never even come close to bombarding the planet.

We're not going to recover from this, he thought, and felt something die within his soul. The Provisional Government had been almost destroyed. He would probably end up with the blame for the entire massacre, even though he hadn't done anything, but risked himself in an attempt to obtain proof that Tiberius intended to turn on him. It had been a mistake, one that had risked lives; Cordova's life, Kathy's life and Colin's himself… and, of course, everyone else in the building. His determination to uphold the rule of law, whatever the cost, had led to the deaths of thousands of people, many innocent.

"It wasn't your fault," Frandsen said, softly. The other Marines had scattered to secure the area. "You did what you thought you had to do."

"That was the problem," Colin replied, bitterly.

"If Tiberius wasn't behind this — and that man didn't commit suicide — then you have another enemy out there," Frandsen said, ignoring Colin's response. "I can't think of any way in which he could have committed suicide — and in any case, the weapon is missing — so someone else killed him. Who?"

"I don't know," Colin said, forcing his mind to focus on the possibilities. Who else wanted to take over the government? It would be easier to come up with a list of people who *didn't* want to take over the government. Had Admiral Wilhelm's long reach reached all the way to Earth? Had Carola somehow planned the entire affair from her prison cell? "If…"

He broke off as Frandsen's helmet buzzed. "Boss, we found Gwendolyn Cicero," one of the Marines said. "She's wounded, but otherwise unhurt." Colin snorted inwardly at the comment. "She's insisting on speaking to you personally."

"Bring her here," Frandsen ordered. "Colin, do you want to speak to her?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Colin said, savagely. "I want to know just what her role in all of this is."

The door opened and two Marines escorted Gwendolyn into the room. Colin studied her as dispassionately as he could, noting the bleeding cut on her forehead and her limp. She had worn a flowing green dress, perfectly cut to show off her curves to best advantage, but now it was torn and coated with blood. Her hands were secured behind her back with a plastic tie, but her eyes were defiant as she

walked between the two men.

"Colin, sir," she said. Her voice lacked some of its earlier bite. Colin hadn't talked to her more than a few times, but he remembered her as being confident and determined, as well as utterly ruthless. She looked broken and beaten now. "I want to trade information for a pardon."

Colin scowled at her. "What kind of information?"

"I know who planned this… massacre," Gwendolyn said, some of the old haughty tone returning to her voice. "I can give you that name in exchange for a pardon."

Colin saw red. "You are in no position to bargain," he said, remembering the pain as Cordova's sword had struck his hidden armour. "Tell me the truth and you won't have to go through a full interrogation."

"There are other ways to get information out of unwilling donors," Frandsen added. There was a cold tone Colin had never heard before in his voice. Marines were used to horror — they were often the first respondents to any disaster — but the death and destruction of Clan Cicero was horrifying by even their standards. "I can take her outside and start hurting her until she tells us what she knows."

Gwendolyn wilted, perhaps understanding that there was no longer anywhere to run.

"Daria," she said, simply. "She planned to kill us all."

Colin's eyes went wide. "You're lying," he protested, unwilling to believe it. Daria had been a comrade since before the first mutinies, the person who had introduced them to the Geeks, the Nerds and so many others. She had been a part of the Provisional Government and… and if Colin and so many others had died, she would have been the only person left of any statue. "Why?"

"Don't you get it?" Gwendolyn said. She broke down into a bitter laugh. "She's the missing Empress. She always has been. And now she's clearing the path to the throne."

She collapsed into helpless laughter.

Colin stared at her, stunned.

Chapter Forty-One

Being on the massive orbital fortress was just like coming home. Charlie had anticipated that there would be all kinds of changes, as there had been at Earth, or on the starships of the Shadow Fleet, but instead the routines were almost the same. The enlisted men and women, which included both himself and Sasha, were assigned to a maintenance pool, with orders to do as they were told and otherwise be seen, but never heard. The Empire had never invested much in educating the enlisted men and women and, when not on duty, they tended to do as they pleased.

Admiral Wilhelm, it seemed, had decided against democratising his fleet. It made sense from one position — there had been starships that had tried to join the Shadow Fleet that had had to vote on going into battle or not — but it was also a weakness. Charlie would have bet good money that the fortress actually had a *lower* efficiency rating than the Shadow Fleet's starships, where ideas and contributions from the lower ranks and enlisted men were actively encouraged. They certainly wouldn't have moved enlisted men around from fortress to fortress, breaking up friendships before they could form and preventing the men from developing any loyalty to their fortress. It might have prevented conspiracies from developing — although it had proved surprisingly unsuccessful at that — but it also hampered the planet's defences.

Midshipman Quinn had performed his task perfectly. Enlisted men and women were normally housed in the barracks on a first-come, first-served basis, but he had ensured that all of the conspirators were sleeping in the same place. It made sharing information, once the handful of bugs had been located and neutralised, much easier, while they could plan their next step in some comfort. Charlie had been relieved to discover that Quinn was genuinely liked and respected by most of the enlisted men, rather than acting like a tyrant or a boy afraid of his own shadow. That was a rarity in the pre-revolution Imperial Navy, but the Midshipmen and women who listened to the enlisted men tended to go further in the fleet before they hit the glass ceiling. It was amazing just how much the enlisted men picked up in their long careers.

The other advantage of being enlisted men and women was that very few senior officers really paid attention to them. "We kept an eye on the armoury as you instructed," one of the enlisted men said. Charlie hadn't been introduced to him and had refrained from accessing his file in the computer databanks. What he didn't know, he couldn't tell, if everything fell apart. "There are two guards, both

reprogrammed SD Troopers, and of course there's the computer locks."

Charlie dismissed the second concern at once. The Empire's persistent refusal to develop any form of AI ensured that their computers were stupid enough to accept anyone whose details were on the authorised list. Quinn, or himself for that matter, would have no difficulty accessing the armoury once the guards were removed, allowing them to take over the fortress. The fortress had been carefully studied and, like a starship, most of its monstrous bulk was irrelevant to its operations. Once they'd taken the command centre, the power generators and the life support systems, the remainder of the crew could surrender or die. With the armoury, the only source of weapons on the fortress, in rebel hands, they wouldn't be able to offer resistance. If all of the fortresses fell at once, if the plan worked perfectly, Cottbus would have the choice between surrender or being bombarded into submission. If the plan didn't work perfectly, the resulting chaos would still weaken Admiral Wilhelm's rear area.

"Good," Quinn said. He shared a long look with Sasha. "I think it's time to go now."

He led the way as the small group headed down through the corridors, looking for the entire world as if they were just another bunch of enlisted men, carrying the standard toolboxes of their trade. It was amazing how many components on a fortress failed on a regular basis and few of the enlisted men knew how to repair them, if repair was even possible. The vast majority of failed or defective components would have to be replaced. It was, in fact, the main task of the enlisted men. They had access to almost everywhere on the station and hardly anyone would even think to question them.

Sloppy, he thought, tiredly. It was a security weakness that Colin, and hundreds of others, had taken ruthless advantage of to launch his mutiny. It was a weakness that was inherent in the way the Empire did business, but Admiral Wilhelm, for all his bombast and tactical competency, couldn't change it. The culture the Imperial Navy had encouraged, to strengthen their own position, meant that that couldn't even question their own preconceptions. Enlisted men were harmless, stupid and barely competent. Everyone knew that…

The armoury itself was in the heart of the fortress's security zone. It should have been manned by Marines, who would generally use it for their own training simulations, but Admiral Wilhelm had moved all of his fleet's Marines to other postings. Charlie hoped that they were alive, wherever they were, but they would have represented a clear and present danger to Admiral Wilhelm's survival. Colin had worked with his ship's Marines to take the ship, but Admiral Wilhelm wouldn't have such links, would he? The safest course of action would

be to kill them all.

He pushed Quinn to the rear, insisting on Sasha and himself leading the way towards the reprogrammed SD Troopers, who watched them with dull unconcern. Admiral Wilhelm's mind techs had reprogrammed them with a complete lack of concern for the consequences, or their own later well being. SD Troopers were completely expendable. Everyone knew that. They were loathed, hated and feared all over the Empire, men — always men, no women — who had been altered to serve the Empire without question. They committed horrendous atrocities without batting an eyelid, looting, raping and burning their way across any world that had displeased the Empire. They had no consciences. They'd been burned out of them.

"You may not enter this area," the lead SD said, lifting a plasma rifle to firing position. He was slow, too slow, and Charlie caught him with his knife. The SD didn't even have a chance to press the firing stud before Charlie cut his throat and sent his body falling to the ground. Sasha threw her knife directly into her SDs head and sent him staggering back against the bulkhead. He was dead before he hit the dead.

"Nicely done," one of the enlisted men said.

Quinn looked sick. "Did… did you have to do that?"

"Yes," Sasha said, flatly. "They would have killed all of us without hesitation if they had caught us doing something we shouldn't be doing. They cannot be reasoned with, or converted to your cause, whatever they may have been in their previous lives."

Charlie nodded, concentrating on opening the access hatch. The computers accepted his access codes and opened for him, allowing him to step into the armoury. It was loaded with hundreds of weapons, including enough heavy weapons to outfit an entire Marine division. Puzzled, he inspected it carefully, trying to understand why they were there. No one in their right mind would fire such weapons onboard a fortress — the incidental damage would be too great — and there was little point in keeping them in orbit. They were designed for use on the surface of the planet.

"Start taking the weapons," he ordered, tightly. The mystery could be solved later. "No, don't bother with the battlesuits, just the light body armour. The battlesuits have to be fitted for each user and we don't have time."

He watched grimly as the rebels armed up, knowing that it would only be a matter of time before someone came by and demanded to know what was going on. Quinn had his men working in shifts, taking weapons and moving onwards to their predetermined targets, combining enlisted men with more experienced junior officers who

could take control of the vital systems at once. He had underestimated the sheer number of weapons on the station, whatever Admiral Wilhelm had in mind. If the other teams were finding the same levels of firepower, the entire planetary defence network would be fatally compromised.

"Come on," Quinn said, finally. He looked like a pirate, carrying enough energy weapons and grenades to pose a serious danger to his fellows if one of the grenades was hit by enemy fire, but there was no mistaking the determination in his voice. "You three, stay behind and ensure that no one who's not with us gets in here… and drag the Blackshirts in here. We may as well try to keep them from being discovered."

"Good thinking," Sasha said. She hefted her own plasma rifle and smiled. "The command centre?"

Quinn nodded and led them through a twisting maze of maintenance corridors and internal tubes. Their passage was slow and cumbersome, but it had the advantage of being almost deserted; they only met two people on the brief climb through the fortress's interior, both of whom were stunned at once. If the rebellion succeeded, they could be recovered later. If it failed, their fate would hardly matter.

He clicked once on the handheld comm he'd taken from the armoury as they climbed out of the maintenance tubes, just outside Officer Country. Not unlike a superdreadnaught, Officer Country — and the command centre beyond — was right at the heart of the fortress. It was intended to give maximum protection to the command crew, although if the fortress lost its shields, the protection wouldn't be enough to save the fragile human beings crewing the massive fortress. The core of the fortress itself might survive, but the crew would die in any number of horrific ways.

The other advantage of Officer Country, of course, was that there were only three ways *into* the centre of the fortress. Quinn had spotted that particular weakness at once; he would, Charlie had decided, have made a good Marine, or Imperial Intelligence operative. Once they were inside Officer Country, it would be extremely hard to dislodge them, even if the remainder of the fortress crew felt inclined to try.

"Team two, take the entrances and seal them," Quinn ordered, calmly enough. "The rest of you, with me."

The two guards at the command hatch were suppressed quickly, allowing Quinn to lead the way into the command centre. The fortress's crew had no time to react as the rebels opened fire with stunners, knocking the commander and the remainder of his command crew out before they could do anything to sabotage the fortress. Quinn had wanted to demand their surrender, but Charlie had advised him to knock them out, just in case one of them felt like being a hero.

People reacted in the oddest ways when faced with an unexpected challenge; there was no point in risking disaster just to be melodramatic.

"We did it," Quinn said, astonished.

"Not yet," Charlie snapped. He stepped over to one of the consoles and rapidly brought up a display of the fortress's internal status. The other two teams had succeeded in their mission, capturing the power systems and life support, all without any casualties. The rebels were sealed inside their captured sections, while the remainder of the crew had no idea what was going on. "We have to find out how the others did."

There were fifteen fortresses orbiting Cottbus, each one powerful enough to scorch the entire planet without support, controlling a secondary array of automated orbital weapons platforms, emplaced missiles and other surprises. Quinn had dispatched teams of rebels to each of them, but statistically Charlie feared that one or more of the teams would fail. If that happened…

"They're checking in," Quinn said, relieved. "We have twelve of the fortresses outright and one more is being contested."

Charlie frowned. "What about the superdreadnaughts?"

His gaze slipped to the tactical display. The three squadrons of superdreadnaughts on guard duty were orbiting within firing range, but they would have time to react if a warning was transmitted from any of the enemy fortresses. He was surprised that they'd been allowed to remain within the gravity shadow while Admiral Garland was running amok in the sector, but the shipyard had to be defended at all costs. He hadn't told Quinn — it would only upset him — but their backup plan involved using the fortresses to destroy the shipyard to prevent it from producing any more war material.

"They're untouched," Quinn said, grimly. He hesitated. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes," Charlie said. They couldn't raise combat shields without warning the enemy ships, but they could target them with missiles, linking the combined fire of all twelve fortresses into an irresistible salvo. "If those ships remain active, the Admiral will be able to use them against Cottbus, or Earth."

He finished typing commands into the computer network. It had been a long time since he'd used such a system, but the Imperial Navy's basic interfaces, designed for officers and men with very little education, rarely changed. They didn't even have any safeguards programmed in to prevent them firing on friendly starships, although *that* was hardly a surprise. Admiral Wilhelm would not want his systems balking at firing on the Imperial Navy, or the Shadow Fleet.

"I know," Quinn said. He sounded older than before now. Charlie

almost pitied him. Rebellion meant turning on friends, family and commanders, breaking sacred oaths in the name of a higher calling — or naked ambition. Had Colin ever entertained such doubts? "Do it."

Charlie pressed the button. The fortress barely shook as it unleashed the first spread of missiles. The other fortresses fired at the same moment, catching the superdreadnaughts in a deadly crossfire, even as their point defence linked them into one entity while their shields snapped up, ready to receive incoming fire. The enemy commander had had a little warning, perhaps a signal from the contested fortress, but it wasn't enough to save most of his ships. They didn't even have a chance to get out of the gravity shadow and flicker away.

"Seven superdreadnaughts have been badly damaged," Sasha said, as the first results came in. Charlie hadn't stopped firing. The second and third salvos were already on their way as the superdreadnaughts started to return fire. Without arsenal ships or *Independence*-class superdreadnaughts, the battle was almost old-style, with the remaining superdreadnaughts giving as much as they got. The fortresses had better point defence, but the superdreadnaughts and their escorts were acting as a single weapon, while the fortresses were scattered. "Two have been destroyed."

Charlie watched as a third joined its companions in death. The superdreadnaughts were adapting quickly to the battle, even though they had been caught while they rushed to battle stations. They were concentrating their firepower on his fortress, while almost ignoring the others, despite the firepower being hurled at them. It was their best tactic, he acknowledged, grateful for the computers that were handling most of the engagement. He couldn't have handled it himself. Even so, the fortresses were at a vast disadvantage in a long conflict, despite their greater firepower. Their point defence was going to be more than a little predicable.

The fortress shuddered for the first time as missiles burst through the point defence to impact against their shields. He looked up at the display, watching grimly as indicators jumped towards the red as the shield generators struggled to compensate for the sudden influx of new and deadly energy, and winced. If the superdreadnaught commander continued the bombardment, they were likely to take out at least three fortresses before they were destroyed, unless they were foolish enough to close to energy weapons range. Somehow, he doubted that they would be that stupid…

"They're pulling back," Quinn said, softly. Charlie felt his eyes go wide. They were going to *live*! One by one, the superdreadnaughts fell back, rising up towards the gravity shadow and escape, protected by their handful of remaining escorts. Most of the superdreadnaughts had

taken some kind of damage, and seven of them had been destroyed. The firing slacked off as they moved out of range, leaving the fortresses in possession of the high orbitals… and hence the planet. "Why…"

The superdreadnaughts passed above the gravity shadow and flickered out. "They're heading towards Drood," Sasha said, after a moment. Her hand worked the console for a long moment. "It's listed as a minor supply dump, nothing too serious, so I dare say we can let them go."

"As if we could stop them," Charlie said. He paused. "I wonder why they decided to leave," he said. "They could have inflicted more damage…"

The display sparkled with red icons. "Incoming ships," Quinn said, grimly. Charlie cursed. Were they going to lose after all they'd accomplished? "They're breaking out of flicker-space now on a raiding profile."

Charlie stared, refusing to believe his eyes.

"That's the Admiral," Sasha said, in delight. Charlie found himself chuckling helplessly with naked relief. "Hail her, now, before she starts shooting. Tell her that we're in control and we'd really like some Marines to help make our conquests permanent."

Quinn stared at her. "Every textbook in the Empire swears blind that it is impossible to coordinate operations between two fleets in different locations," he said. The suspicion in his voice was palatable… and written all over his face. "How did you manage to get the Admiral's fleet here right on time?"

Sasha winked at him. "What can I say?" She said. "We're pretty damned good."

Charlie rolled his eyes behind Quinn's back. It had been a coincidence, although perhaps not an unexpected one… but there was no reason why Quinn had to know that. Imperial Intelligence needed to recover some of its reputation…

And besides, the truth would only upset him.

Chapter Forty-Two

The atmosphere in the room was sober.

Colin glanced around the table, seeing who was present… and who was missing. Kathy Tyler, the heroine of the hour and the only person to emerge with much credit, was present. So was Jason Cordova, her lover, even though the news feeds flooding across the solar system were very ambiguous about his role in events. Blondel Dupre, Prime Minister, and René Goscinny, Foreign Minister and First-Rank Representative, were also present, as was Admiral Arun Prabhu. The missing seemed to haunt the table; Tiberius Cicero, Daria and Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter. Their presence seemed to pervade the room, even though one of them was dead and the other two were missing.

The security forces had started a search at once, but hours later, Colin had had to conclude that Daria had either managed to make it off-planet or had gone to ground somewhere where she couldn't be easily found. Every man's hand was against her now, her role in the bloody slaughter of thousands of people, many of them aristocrats, common knowledge. Nothing spread through the Empire like bad news and that was the worst news of all. Gwendolyn's warning that Grand Admiral Joshua Wachter was still alive had worried Colin. There was only one possible reason to fake his death, only one role that he could fill, and that was commander of a fleet. Out there, somewhere, Daria still had a fleet. It was the only conclusion that made sense.

And Admiral Wilhelm was out there too. Colin couldn't believe that they were allies, the former Empress and the Admiral who had made his own grasp for power. They were rivals as well — he wondered, absently, if there was a way to set them at each other's throats — but both of them wanted Earth. Admiral Wilhelm's path led directly towards Earth and Colin was sure that invasion was imminent. They would be challenging the Shadow Fleet, but he might well have the firepower to prevail… and Daria knew almost everything about the defences of Earth. She had once been an Admiral herself. She wouldn't commit her forces to the attack until she was certain she could win, not with everything at stake.

The betrayal hurt. Colin had cared for Daria, even if they had been too different to act on their mutual attraction… but had it really been mutual attraction? In hindsight, had Daria tried to attract him to bind him to her cause, or had she been under stress as well and searching for a partner? She'd done something that only Joshua had done before and forced Colin to doubt himself and his actions. How

much had she done to impede the development of the Provisional Government? How much had she done to cause the bushfires and minor conflicts that threatened to spring up all over the Empire? At the last, was everything they had achieved to be torn down, just because one woman wanted to return to the Imperial Throne?

Never, he thought coldly, and turned to face the table.

"We may be attacked at any moment," he said, without preamble. They weren't the type of people to be impressed by meaningless pleasantries, even if he had felt like wasting time. "By my most pessimistic estimates, Admiral Wilhelm should be here by now, so he may arrive at any time. We will also have to face the fleet that the Empress" — he refused to use her name, even through it hadn't been her original name — "has assembled, a fleet of unknown strength."

"Four superdreadnaught squadrons," Cordova said. Colin blinked, quirking an eyebrow, at his confidence. "The ships that fled Home Fleet during the final battle for Earth — what we thought was the final battle for Earth — and vanished. They didn't show up in Admiral Wilhelm's line of battle at Cottbus, so they didn't go to join him, and Daria used to command Home Fleet. She had plenty of time to place her own people in positions of power."

Colin shivered. Again, for the second time since Joshua had beaten him at Morrison, he had the distant feeling that he was outmatched. It had taken him years of planning and careful action to build up the core conspiracy that had seized the Macore Observation Squadron and then Commodore Stacy Roosevelt's superdreadnaughts, but he hadn't been forced to leave some people hanging out on a limb for over fifty years. Planning on that timescale should have been impossible, but Daria had managed it, somehow… and, in doing so, had brought the Empire to its knees. Their sole prisoner from her inner circle — insofar as she'd *had* an inner circle — had worked for her for over fifty years too, although Gwendolyn hadn't known that Daria intended a mass slaughter.

His blood ran cold as he contemplated the possibilities. If Daria had remained unnoticed, she would have been running the Empire by now… and the irony was that she might have done him a favour. Parliament had stopped wasting time in the aftermath of the massacre; they might even manage to create the first Empire-wide governing system to replace the Thousand Families. The prospect of hanging had concentrated more than a few minds wonderfully well. They couldn't expect much mercy from the Empress when she regained her throne. The horror stories the Thousand Families had spread about her, turning her into a bogyman, were only encouraging that trend. They didn't want to face her with a fleet backing her and Earth naked and defenceless.

“Regardless, we may be in trouble,” Colin said. He looked up at the tactical display, scowling. “If I was in command of that fleet, I would be lurking nearby, watching Earth for the arrival of Admiral Wilhelm. Once that battle is done, I would move my ships in and take out the victor. We have to prepare for that possibility.”

“I have sent courier boats to the assembly points for the first-rank defence forces,” René Goscinny said, calmly. He looked to have grown up a great deal in the past two months, although there was nothing like surviving a space battle to focus the mind. Katy had clearly impressed him during their brief acquaintance. “They should be ready to come to our assistance within the week, although we had planned to deploy them against Admiral Wilhelm when he attacked a second first-rank world.”

Colin rather doubted that the Admiral would bother — attacking anywhere, but Earth or AlphaCent would only weaken him while adding nothing to his strength — but he held his peace. If the first-rank worlds got involved, they would add enough ships to the defence forces to give them a fighting chance. The losses would be horrendous, however, and revenge certain if they lost. Everything was at stake now.

“The Shadow Fleet is on full alert,” Admiral Arun Prabhu assured him. Arun was an old friend, one of the original members of the conspiracy, and Colin trusted him implicitly. The thought was bitter in his mouth. He’d also trusted Daria, while nursing doubts about Cordova and even Kathy. “When they arrive, we will give them a beating, never doubt that.”

“The Volunteer Fleet can be assembled, but I don’t know if it can be trusted,” Cordova said. He sounded almost normal now. It had to be a vast relief to finally get it off his chest. Colin had assured him that, whatever happened, he wouldn’t be lynched for sparing the lives of millions of helpless aliens. “Daria did most of the legwork in assembling it and… well, they may be her loyalists. I don’t think that most of them would believe she was the Empress, even if *I* told them, and they might even see it as a plot to get rid of her by the Imperial Navy. We might find ourselves inviting enemies within the defences.”

Goscinny blinked. “Surely they couldn’t do much damage…”

“Battles have been won or lost before because of the presence or absence of a single ship,” Cordova said, shortly. He looked over at Colin. “Sir, I request permission to return to the *Random Numbers* and fight in the battle.”

Colin lifted an eyebrow, catching the expression of worry and fear that flashed across Kathy’s face. It would be easy to deny the request — and he was sure that that was what Kathy wanted him to do — but it would be unjust. Cordova was one of the best

commanding officers he had met and his presence on the battlefield might be decisive, even if the *Random Numbers* was far from a powerful superdreadnaught. Besides, how could he deny Cordova anything? He'd saved the Empire.

"Granted," he said, and ignored the look on Kathy's face, even if she didn't protest aloud. "Prime Minister, what about Parliament?"

Blondel smiled tiredly. "Well, the remaining MPs have passed a law disinheriting the remainder of the Thousand Families and placing most of their possessions in the hands of the government," she said. "If Kathy works quickly, most of them can be sublet down to their workers, allowing them a chance to take control and reform the systems. The remaining Thousand Family aristocrats are too traumatized to do anything to object and by the time they rediscover their nerve, their weapons will have been knocked from their hands."

"I hope so," Kathy said. There was a hard brittle edge to her voice. "In the long run, the centres of industry will probably be with the first-rank worlds, but in the short term, we should see considerable boosts in production. If we win the coming fight, there will be a long period of peace and quiet to reconstruct the economy. If we lose… well, it hardly matters any longer."

Colin smiled. If they lost to either of the enemy forces, they would be hung or otherwise disposed of, *pour encourager les autres*. Neither Daria nor Admiral Wilhelm could leave them alive, no matter the possible advantages to be gained through clemency. They couldn't afford to leave them as a rallying point for resistance.

"Good," he said, finally. He stood up in one smooth motion. "We will meet again in a week's time. By then, all of this will be over, one way or the other."

They started to file out of the room. "Admiral, a word with you please," Colin said, before Arun could leave. "I have something I want to discuss with you."

* * *

The small transport appeared out of nowhere, flickering into existence near the edge of the fleet's security zone. Penny, on the *General Monck's* flag deck, had almost brought the fleet to red alert before the IFF signal came in, revealing that the transport was carrying the Empress from Earth. She informed Joshua, expecting that the Empress would want to dock with the *General Monck* and discuss matters with him, but instead she headed over to the *General Cromwell* and docked with that superdreadnaught.

"Rather an obvious choice, I'd have thought," Joshua observed

while they waited for the communications network to link the two ships together. The Empress had added a whole new spectrum of security checks that bespoke of inhuman paranoia, although Penny had to admit that they were necessary. “I would have chosen a different ship if I had been in her shoes.”

Penny turned to him to ask why, but Daria’s holographic image appeared in front of both of them before she could open her mouth. Penny had only seen her once before, but she’d looked like… well, just anyone, rather than an Empress. She’d looked surprisingly normal, like a girl who had washed her face clean of all cosmetics, but now she looked almost terrifying. She wore the midnight-black uniform of a Grand Admiral, with a line of golden ribbons on her shoulder that marked her out as the Empress — she had been the only person ever to wear such decorations; they had been banned after she’d been disposed — and looked almost terrifying. Her red hair contrasted sharply with her uniform, framing her sharp angular face, while she looked tired and deeply angry. Penny had seen faces like that before, on combat stress victims, and she wondered just what had happened on Earth.

If Joshua had noticed, he gave no sign. “Your Highness,” he said, gravely. There was no trace of mocking in his voice, none of the artificial respect that he so hated, and he sounded sincere. “May I ask what brings you here so early?”

“I was exposed,” Daria said, calmly. Her voice might have been calm, but Penny, well used to people who hid their real feelings, sensed a deep wave of anger under her tone. The former Empress — and perhaps future Empress — was terrifyingly furious at someone… and it didn’t take a genius to guess who. Colin must have come out ahead in their power game. “We may have to move soon, within the week.”

Joshua lifted an eyebrow. “Admiral Wilhelm?”

“He hasn’t shown up to fight yet,” Daria said, “but the Shadow Fleet believes that it is just a matter of time.”

Penny nodded. Joshua and her had gone through all of the possibilities while working on bringing the fleet to full readiness. Admiral Wilhelm’s only real choice was to go for Earth before he was crushed by superior force. Given time, Colin’s Empire could produce enough firepower to crush the combined fleets of four sectors, and then go on to impose their own order. Admiral Wilhelm’s only hope was to take Earth and then the shipyards, or destroy the latter. It would throw resistance back on the hidden shipyards along the Rim and give him time to build up his own capabilities.

“That is understood,” Joshua said, calmly. “Do you wish a full report on the status of your fleet?”

“I will access it from the computers,” Daria said, equally gravely. That was something that Joshua had changed, at least; it was now a major offence to upload false information into a readiness report. It had been that kind of behaviour that had literally ruined an entire Sector Fleet at Morrison. Penny had once estimated that a superdreadnaught crewed by a honest crew, like the men and women who followed Colin, was far more likely to prevail against one that had been run down into the ground by negligence. Admiral Wilhelm, going from the records Admiral Garland had sent back from Cottbus, had also fixed that problem. It would mean that all three fleets were at the height of their power.

And we're going to be the weakest, she thought, knowing how Joshua would fight the battle. He would hold off until Admiral Wilhelm and the Shadow Fleet, either under Colin's direct command or one of his subordinates, had battered each other into oblivion… and then attack. Their weakness would become a strength. The only question would be how strong Earth's fixed defences were these days.

“I will bring the fleet to alert now,” Joshua concluded. “I assume that there is a starship in the solar system, waiting for the attack?”

“Of course,” Daria said. Now that she wasn't pretending any longer, Penny could hear a haughty tone in her voice, a sense that it no longer mattered what people thought of her. “Once they arrive, you can move in under cloak.”

Her image vanished. “Fascinating,” Joshua said, conversationally. “Did you notice what she didn't say?”

Penny nodded. “Why was she exposed?”

“Exactly,” Joshua said. He looked down at the display for a long moment, watching as the tiny icons representing the secret fleet danced around the *General Monck*. “What went so badly wrong on Earth that she had to flee for her life?”

“You don't think that she could be lying to us?”

Joshua laughed. “I think that she didn't tell us anything that could be constituted as a lie,” he said, dryly. Penny flushed. She hated looking like an idiot in front of him. “Do you remember when we allowed Admiral Garland to leave Morrison to warn the rebels of the plan to scorch Gaul?”

“Of course,” Penny said. She remembered that clearly. It was the main reason why Joshua had come out of the entire rebellion as a hero to both sides, despite having fought on the wrong side — the one that lost. It had been a moment of shining compassion in a universe that tended to punish such decisions. “Do you want to do the same again here?”

“I don't know,” Joshua said, softly. For a moment, despite his appearance, Penny saw his true age shining through. “I don't know

which way to turn. If the Empress regains her throne, we have a strong Empire, without the wasted chattering of Parliament or the chaos of devolving government as far downwards as possible. We can start a process of reform that will rejuvenate and reinvigorate the Empire, without having to worry about people trying to block the process for their own reasons, or because they benefited from the status quo…

"But I don't know if she can give us that any longer," he concluded. The bitterness and despair in his voice shocked her. Joshua was at his best when dealing with black and while space battles, not political manoeuvring and knives in the back. What, she wondered suddenly, had happened to Tiberius? Where was he? "It's the best hope I have left… and it is a very thin line of hope indeed."

Penny stared at him. "You could stop her now," she said. It would be easy. The Household Troops on the starships were loyal to Joshua. They could head over to the *General Cromwell* and arrest Daria… or could they? It dawned on Penny that there might have been a very good reason why Daria had chosen that particular starship. It was crewed by people who would almost certainly be loyal to her. "You could…"

"I know," Joshua said, "but I can't. I cannot do anything, but wait here for history to move past us, helplessly trapped to play the roles she assigned us long ago. What else can we do, but make one final bid to save the Empire from its own people?"

Chapter Forty-Three

"It doesn't look like much, does it?"

Admiral Wilhelm gazed into the stars ahead of the superdreadnaught. One of them was marginally closer and brighter than the rest, but there was little else to mark it out as *The* Sun, the star that shone on the world that gave humanity birth. The romantic part of his mind had wondered if he would know it when he saw it, but without the electronic tracking system, he wouldn't have been able to pick it out from the thousands of other stars, glaring out endlessly against the darkness of space. It was just another star.

"No, sir," Captain Keene agreed. The fleet was assembling around the starship in good order, despite Admiral Wilhelm's decision to shift his flag again, to a whole new superdreadnaught. It was a security decision, or so he had claimed, but the truth was that he wanted to keep his people on their toes. An alert crew was one that wouldn't be surprised when the enemy forces emerged from flicker-space, intent on killing every last one of them before they could react. "It should look bigger, somehow."

The starships were falling into formation now. It was easy to loose track of starships, even entire fleets, in the gulf between the stars; it wouldn't have been possible to hop directly from Wakanda to Earth, or at least arrive in fighting shape. The fleet was gathering slowly at the designated waypoint, exchanging brief confirmations of their status as they powered up their weapons and sensors, preparing for war. One way or the other, it would all be over soon.

He allowed his gaze to sweep across the superdreadnaughts. "Look at it," he said, watching as the display updated yet again as a squadron of light cruisers were slotted into their appointed positions. "Eighty-one superdreadnaughts, ninety battlecruisers and over two hundred other starships, working together as a perfect force, the largest force that anyone has ever assembled since the Fall of Earth. Doesn't it seem irresistible?"

"Yes, sir," Captain Keene agreed. His voice softened slightly. "We drilled them until they were performing manoeuvres in their sleep. They're ready."

Admiral Wilhelm smiled. "And Earth is not," he said. "Even if they have anticipated our arrival, how could they have prepared for such strength? We wrecked enough of their deployable forces at Cottbus to make defending Earth and all the other vital targets difficult, if not impossible." He shook his head. "I love it when a plan comes together."

He looked up again towards the sun. It had worked almost exactly

as he had planned it, although the loss of the supply dump had tipped his hand. He had known — even if he hadn't told the two silly bitches from the Thousand Families — that the Provisional Government would send out a fleet to extract retribution for the destruction of the cruisers, a fleet that expected to encounter only one Sector Fleet. It's near-destruction had forced them to concentrate on defending Earth, but they couldn't mass enough firepower to stop him, he hoped. The Nerds had assured him of that. They would be unable to stop his fleet. He almost pitied them.

A chime sounded as the final ships linked into the command network. "We're ready," sir," Captain Keene said. "The final starships have arrived."

"I see no reason to delay," Admiral Wilhelm said, calmly. He looked down at the display, watching his fleet settling into a formation a civilian would have thought of as untidy. It was, in a sense, but rigid fleet formations were only useable in displays or propaganda videos intended to impress the largely ignorant masses. "Signal the fleet. Inform them… that it is time to advance."

He glanced at his timepiece. "Launch marks, five minutes," he ordered. "Select coordinates; Plan Three. Upload them into the fleet network and prepare to flicker."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said, as he took his seat. He always felt nervous before flickering into combat, but this time, at least, they could be fairly certain that they wouldn't be jumping straight into a combat zone. Earth presented almost-unique defence problems for anyone holding the system. The defenders would be concentrated around Earth. *He* had no intention of going there, yet. "Plan Three uploaded."

The final seconds ticked down quickly. "Flicker," he ordered. "Take us into battle."

He winced as his stomach twisted. The shock was worse than normal, but he could tolerate it, although it wasn't as if he had a choice. There were those that claimed that the flicker-shock was purely psychometric, but they were people who'd never experienced it. The flicker-shock was real. He knew it in his bones.

The starships burst back into normal space. "Emergence, sir," the tactical officer said. "We are within predicted range of the planet Mars."

"Excellent," Admiral Wilhelm said. It *was* excellent, well within his expected arrival range and, with the flicker-drive being what it was, lucky as well. "Confirm that there are no starships within engagement range and bring the fleet to battle stations. They'll know we're here by now."

* * *

Admiral Arun Prabhu found himself jerking awake as the alarm screamed a warning. No military force could remain on alert constantly, despite the delusions of politicians and civilians who thought of military men and women as barely a grade above robots, and he'd been trying to sleep when the alarm had woken him. The superdreadnaught *General Grant*, Colin's former flagship and the Shadow Fleet's current command ship, had been waiting for the attack everyone knew was coming, but the crew still had to rest, even their Admiral.

He hit the intercom as he dressed rapidly. One advantage of orbiting deep within the gravity shadow was that the enemy couldn't appear out of nowhere, not unless they were very lucky. Earth's defence system was the most advanced and sensitive in the entire Empire, with the possible exception of whatever the Geeks and Nerds had defending their secret bases, and he would have sworn blind that no one could have slipped a cloaked ship through without being detected. Even the best cloaking devices could only compensate for so much before they overloaded and started missing details that alert watchers could use to track the ship.

"Report," he snapped. He was just glad that Colin had agreed, finally, to remain on one of the command fortresses, rather than the starship. Arun had been following events on the ground with mounting concern and Colin's death would have ruined everything, including Arun's private motive for joining the rebellion. Hindustan, the world that had given birth to the young Arun, was an offence against humanity, a world where caste was absolute, part of the genetic code. His pale skin and dark eyes marked him as a Brahmin, one of the rulers, free to use the lesser castes as he liked. He hated it. "I need a sit-rep, now!"

"We're picking up a major emergence signature, looks to be at least two hundred ships, near Mars," the tactical officer reported. Arun knew relief — they were not about to be attacked at once from cloak — and then fear. The enemy should have gone directly for Earth. The fact that they had attacked Mars instead suggested that they had something else up their sleeve. "The fleet is going to alert now and your presence is requested on the flag bridge."

Arun forgot his jacket, scooped up his terminal in one hand and his cap in the other, and ran for the door. The flag bridge was only a few meters from his cabin, but he forced himself to walk calmly just before the hatch hissed open, allowing him access to the heart of the defences. The holographic display caught his eye at once. A mass of red light, icons blurring together into one contagious mass, hovered

near Mars. It was, he realised numbly, far more than just four superdreadnaught squadrons.

"Why Mars?" He asked, cursing the time delay under his breath as he took his command chair. Mars was far enough from Earth to make intervention almost impossible, unless he took the fleet out of Earth's gravity shadow and flickered out to engage the enemy. It might be what the enemy wanted. If they intended to lure the Shadow Fleet away from the defences, they'd picked a neat way of doing so. "What's on Mars that is so important?"

He called up tactical data and swore again. Mars had only limited defences, compared to Earth; a handful of outdated fortresses, some ground-based planetary defence systems and a dozen or so gunboats. The orbiting moons and asteroids that had been converted into industrial centres and habitats were effectively naked. The enemy could send down a pair of superdreadnaught squadrons and Mars's orbit would be swept clean of life.

"Send a pair of recon destroyers to Mars to obtain an accurate count on those starships," he ordered, cursing the long-range sensors. Drive fields might send out gravimetric pulses that travelled faster than light, but the enemy fleet was bunched together so tightly that they couldn't pick out each individual ship at such range. He called up the records from their emergence, but they'd come into the system together, bunched up to make reading out individual ships difficult. He'd seen that trick worked before, mainly at Macore when it had been used to slip a superdreadnaught squadron into engagement range of the Shadow Fleet, but here it was being used to far more effect. The enemy commander, whoever it was, had guts.

"Aye, Admiral," the communications officer said. The recon destroyers had been orbiting up above the gravity shadow. Arun hoped — prayed, to gods he no longer really believed in — that they would be able to slip in and out unmolested, but if the enemy were alert, they might manage to catch the destroyers before they could flicker out. "They're on their way."

Arun nodded grimly as two icons vanished from the display, appearing a moment later near Mars, trying to remain close enough to the enemy fleet to see through the haze of ECM covering them while remaining out of weapons range. It wasn't going to be easy, but destroyer skippers were used to such risks. If it could be done, they would do it.

We used to use the Freebooters to recon systems, he thought, grimly. He had barely known Daria and couldn't say that he was affected by her actual identity, but losing the Freebooters was a shock. *Who did he use to recon the system… or did he jump in without bothering with recon first?*

“Get me a direct link to the command fortress, secure line,” he ordered. He had to confer with Colin. Knowingly or otherwise, whoever was commanding that massive fleet had placed them in a hell of a blind. They had an obligation to defend Mars, but honouring that obligation would leave Earth’s defences dependent on the fixed defences. It might not have been such a danger without the threat of Geek-level technology in enemy hands, including long-range multiple warhead missiles and other unpleasant surprises. “Colin, we need to talk.”

The direct link was secure. No one could hear them. “I know,” Colin said. There was a grim note in his voice as well. He was as capable as Arun at working out the possible consequences of either rushing to Mars’s rescue or abandoning it to its fate. “We don’t have a choice, but to make an attempt to drive them away from Mars.”

“Yes, sir,” Arun echoed. Colin was right. There were over five billion people on Mars, including the terraformed surface and the orbital habitats, and they had a responsibility to protect them. Imperial Navy or Shadow Fleet, they had that shared responsibility… and they would not leave civilians behind if they could help it. “I’ll start the movements now.”

“Good luck,” Colin said. His voice faded slightly. “I wish I was with you.”

The surviving recon destroyer flickered back into existence. “Admiral, we’re getting a download now,” the tactical officer said. The display updated rapidly with the destroyer’s sensor readings, finally pasting shape and form on the enemy fleet. It was larger than he had anticipated, with nine squadrons of superdreadnaughts and hundreds of smaller ships. Admiral Wilhelm had finally come calling. “I confirm the presence of several ships that took part in the Battle of Cottbus…”

“It’s Admiral Wilhelm,” Arun said, to Colin. It wasn’t a surprise, but somehow he had a nasty feeling that he knew exactly what Daria had in mind, if she did indeed have a fleet of her own. He knew from experience how hard it was to operate any kind of plan over such a timescale, but her plan had worked out fine so far, even if something had gone badly wrong. It hadn’t proved fatal to her. “Do you still want us to engage?”

Colin nodded tiredly. “Yes, Arun,” he said. “If he comes here, we have a few surprises in store for him.”

Arun nodded and broke the connection. “Helm, take us out of the gravity shadow,” he ordered. They were close enough to Earth for its gravity shadow to impede sensor readings, but Admiral Wilhelm would definitely see them as they rose up and prepared to flicker into engagement range. He had eighty-one superdreadnaughts, while Arun had seventy-two, but half of them were *Independence*-class ships. The

Shadow Fleet also had the latest arsenal ships and several other surprises, even if Colin had insisted on keeping some of them back for a later reveal. It was going to be a far more evenly matched battle than Admiral Wilhelm probably supposed.

"Aye, sir," the helmsman said. On the display, the Shadow Fleet was rising out of high orbit, leaving the massive defence stations and orbiting asteroids behind as it strove for space. They were in good hands — Colin had had the entire system renovated after the Fall of Earth — but Arun still worried about them. Defending a fixed and effectively stationary target such as a planet was much harder than defending a starship, or even an asteroid. Colin had proven that Earth was far from invulnerable… and Admiral Wilhelm had probably studied the records of the battle with the greatest interest. "We will be out of the gravity shadow in seven minutes."

Arun took a decision. "Override the safety protocols," he ordered, tightly. "Get us out of the shadow as quickly as possible."

The superdreadnaught hummed louder as safety protocols were discarded, allowing the superdreadnaught to speed up, although it wouldn't be able to reach its maximum speed. The Imperial Navy had speed limits for any starship in orbit around a planet, just to limit the possibility of disaster, although Arun knew that most commercial spacers mocked the precautions. The Imperial Navy didn't. An object the size of a superdreadnaught crashing down on a planet would have results almost as disastrous as a scorching.

"Revised time estimate," the helmsman said. "Two minutes to the edge of the gravity shadow."

"Good," Arun said. The superdreadnaught couldn't build up speed rapidly. It was just too massive, even for its prodigious power plant, for a drive field to push it along any faster. They couldn't afford risking a drive field collapse. "Contact the fleet. I want coordinates for a least-time hop to Mars ready and waiting when we leave the gravity shadow."

* * *

"They're on their way," the tactical officer said. Admiral Wilhelm looked up from where he had been admiring the view of Mars, a strange orb with a mixture of red, blue and green colours. Humanity had terraformed Mars long before the flicker drive had been invented and the planet now hosted more people than Earth, or even the remainder of the solar system. They resented, heavily, their permanent subordination to Earth. They might even make allies once he had won the war. "Their fleet is definitely moving out of the

gravity shadow and up to a point where they can flicker out to engage us."

"Exactly as I anticipated," Admiral Wilhelm said. He looked down at the display for a long moment, running through the vectors in his head. The Imperial Navy ships wouldn't have risked everything for Mars, but they couldn't have allowed him to remain where he was indefinitely, not unless they wanted to shut Mars's industries down permanently. They couldn't get anything from Jupiter or outside the solar system as long as he held the space just outside the Martian gravity shadow. The presence of two moons, even through they were much smaller than Earth's moon, had their own effect on the gravity shadow. "How long until they can flicker out?"

"Two minutes," the tactical officer said. "They're disregarding the speed limits."

"Someone's got an imagination over there," Captain Keene said. Admiral Wilhelm snorted rudely. The hell of it was that Captain Keene was probably right. The Imperial Navy hadn't encouraged that sort of initiative from its officers, even when it was clearly necessary. An officer with imagination was an officer who could imagine life without his incompetent superiors… with, ideally, himself in charge. "Do you still want to go with Plan Alpha?"

"Yes," Admiral Wilhelm said. Plan Alpha was risky as hell, but it offered the greatest chance of winning the battle outright. They couldn't afford a long drawn-out siege. "Helm, bring up the Plan Alpha flight path and upload it to the fleet." He paused. "Flicker."

* * *

"Now approaching the gravity edge," the helmsman said. Arun allowed himself a moment of relief, even though the enemy fleet had remained at Mars, daring him to do anything about them. They hadn't even bothered to bombard Mars, although it would have been a pointless exercise in brutality. "Flicker drives online and…"

"*Emergence*," the tactical officer shouted, as the display filled with red icons. Arun had barely a moment to realise that the entire battle scene had changed before the newcomers opened fire. The entire battle had turned upside down. "Incoming missiles, incoming missiles…!"

Admiral Wilhelm's arsenal ships spat almost two hundred thousand missiles right into the teeth of the Shadow Fleet.

Chapter Forty-Four

"*Jesus fucking Christ.*"

"As you were," Arun barked. The enemy had pulled a rabbit out of their hats in an amazing — and seemingly impossible — burst of flying, but it wasn't perfect. They might have had better luck if they'd sneaked the arsenal ships up on Earth, but few officers would have dared to try that against Earth's defences. The missiles were coming at them in clumps, targeted on three of the point squadrons of superdreadnaughts, rather than one massive swarm. They might just have a chance. "Unlock the point defence, *now*!"

A commander from before the rebellion would have frozen, faced with such an impossible attack. Arun had commanded such destruction before, ordered it unleashed against the Imperial Navy loyalists during the war, even faced it during the terrifying moments when the Shadow Fleet had seemed trapped at Morrison. They had trained endlessly to face such monstrous assaults, improving their point defence systems to the point where they could target and track even missiles fired at point-blank range, but there were just so many missiles. They could take out three-fourths of the assault and still take horrendous damage.

Above them, barely noticeable against the swarm of missiles, Admiral Wilhelm's starships were emerging from flicker-space, falling into position for engaging the Shadow Fleet after the arsenal ships had handed out a pounding. They had played that part of their plan more carefully, he saw; they'd brought their ships in out of missile range, preventing him from trying to even the score. There was no point in targeting the empty arsenal ships now. Shot dry, having unloaded all of their missiles within a minute of the firing command, they would only absorb his missiles for no return. Admiral Wilhelm had played a masterful trick.

"Point defence is engaging now," the tactical officer said. The display zoomed out, showing the missiles as an unbroken wall of red icons, falling on his ships like wolves on a flock of sheep. Counter-missiles were being launched, followed by energy weapons and pulsars, but they seemed so weak and frail compared to the torrent of missiles. It seemed endless, even to his experienced eyes, and he knew that some of his men were going to die. "Admiral, the commander of the arsenal ship squadron is requesting permission to move up and engage."

"Denied," Arun ordered tightly. The arsenal ships might well be prime targets, but there was no point in allowing them to move forward to engage, not when the incoming missiles would just get

them first. In Admiral Wilhelm's shoes, he would have programmed the missiles to take any shot they could get at an arsenal ship… and, despite their firepower, the arsenal ships had barely any more armour than a freighter. They would be blown away like a leaf in a hurricane and their firepower would be lost. "Tell them to fall back and let the big boys take the first blow."

The superdreadnaught's lighting flickered slightly as it opened fire with its heavy energy weapons, sweeping hundreds of missiles from the incoming swarm out of existence, breaking them down to their component particles. The fission beams ripped their targets apart, rending and tearing the bonds that held matter together, normally intended for use on other superdreadnaughts. They were terrifying weapons, altering the entire face of warfare when they were first invented, and few superdreadnaughts would risk coming into energy range of another superdreadnaught. Missiles were survivable, even at such a vast cost, but fission beams could rip even superdreadnaughts apart. If the weapons could be fired constantly, the missile swarm would simply have creased to exist…

The missiles came on and on, into the teeth of his point defence. Hundreds were diverted, expending themselves uselessly on decoys, while others were picked off and destroyed instantly by the point defence. Thousands survived to make it through the first line of defence and onwards into the inner defence zone, hacking their way through the gunboats and point defence escorts by sheer weight of numbers. Arun realised, with a moment of muted relief, that Admiral Wilhelm had made one mistake. Given a perfect opportunity to strip the Shadow Fleet of most of its escorts, he had targeted, instead, the superdreadnaughts. It was an understandable mistake, but it might prove a costly one, even with his numerical advantage. Arun would be able to safeguard his own ships…

"Missiles entering final engagement vectors now," the tactical officer said. "Incoming…"

The superdreadnaught heaved as three missiles struck home against its port shields, then plunged as two more missiles slammed home against the prow shields, shaking the entire ship as the shield generators struggled to compensate. Arun clutched onto his command chair as red icons flickered up on the display, warning of damage to a dozen seconds as the missiles continued to pound. If they had all been fired at the *General Grant*, the result would have been disastrous, but instead they had been spread out over three squadrons. He forced himself to stare into the display as the pounding continued, watching the destruction of some of his ships, refusing to look away as losses mounted.

A superdreadnaught lost its shields and, before they could be re-

established, four missiles slipped through and slammed into the unprotected hulk, burning through the armour and detonating inside the ship. The superdreadnaught drifted out of position and then exploded into a ball of plasma, vaporising completely as the damage soared out of control. Another two died in the same manner, while still others struggled to survive tearing wounds inflicted on their hulls, trying to avoid leaving the battle. He watched five more superdreadnaughts die in quick succession as the missile bombardment slowly came to an end, before it was finally over.

No, he corrected himself, watching as the red icons of Admiral Wilhelm's fleet settled down into their formation. *It's far from over*.

"Get me an update on the fleet's status," he ordered. They'd lost nearly a squadron of superdreadnaughts and others were damaged, some of them badly. The *General*-class ships, he noted, had suffered the worst, although one of the *Independence*-class ships had been hammered so badly that it had to withdraw, leaking air. "Re-establish the command network and prepare for a missile duel."

He smiled grimly as the display updated. "And pull us back further into the gravity shadow," he added. "If they want us, they're going to have to come after us."

* * *

The fleet had launched drones as soon as it flickered back into existence, allowing Admiral Wilhelm to have a grandstand view of the destruction of the Shadow Fleet. The missiles hadn't been as effective as the Nerds had promised, he realised at once, although he was honest enough to admit that that might have been something to do with the arsenal ships. He'd considered trying to sneak them into the system, but that would have been risky; Earth's defences had been legend before the Shadow Fleet had attacked and taken the system and they were still formidable.

"Interesting," he mused, watching the readings. It was hard for even the Nerd-designed drones to pick out perfect detail from the haze of distortion caused by ECM and the detonation of so many missiles, but it looked as if the Shadow Fleet had taken a beating. Twelve ships appeared to be missing, presumed destroyed, while others were staggering away from the battlezone, leaking air and plasma into space. They were probably intending to cut across the gravity shadow and run, but he could have them intercepted, if he chose to do so. "Launch a second spread of probes and advance the point defence escorts."

Captain Keene blinked at him. "Admiral, with all due respect, that

will expose us to the fire of their arsenal ships," he protested. "They survived the missile bombardment."

"We have nine superdreadnaught squadrons to their seven, not counting escorts," Admiral Wilhelm said, flatly. He waved one hand towards the display, focusing it on the orbital fortresses defending the planet, behind the Shadow Fleet. "Our opponent is trying to fall back on the defences and if they combine their firepower, they're going to be much harder to take. We cannot afford to shoot ourselves dry, understand?"

Captain Keene nodded. They'd lost their supply dump and Wakanda, despite hopes and an incompetent government that could turn gold into dross, hadn't been a source of any replacement missiles. A starship, even a superdreadnaught, without missiles was a sitting duck, easy prey for anyone who suspected the truth. If they shot themselves dry, the remaining rebel forces that defended AlphaCent would race to the Solar System and destroy them before they could escape. There was little point in trying to raid a rebel supply dumb either. They didn't know where they were. The only way to resupply would be to head back to Cottbus… and by then it would be too late.

Admiral Wilhelm frowned. "Add the arsenal ships to the targeting systems as priority targets," he added. "We can afford to spare the superdreadnaughts some of our missiles, just to try and dispose of the arsenal ships. Its worth the risk."

"Aye, sir," Captain Keene said.

The superdreadnaught's drive seemed to hum louder as it slid closer to the gravity shadow and glided across it. Admiral Wilhelm tensed, even though he felt nothing, knowing that almost everyone in the fleet who knew that they were crossing the gravity shadow felt the same. Like flicker-shock, it was supposed to be psychometric, although in this case he suspected that the headshrinkers were right. There was no obvious difference in normal space between the interior and exterior of a gravity shadow, although anyone attempting to use a flicker drive inside the shadow wouldn't have a chance to regret the mistake.

The enemy fleet was having drive problems, he realised. That shouldn't have been surprising, although it wasn't something that any sane officer would have counted upon. The effects of the bombardment would have destabilised a few drive fields and even though it could be countered, and probably would be countered, it would take time for the engineers to recalibrate their drives, limiting the maximum speeds of the targeted ships. His opponent had evidently decided to keep his ships together, regardless of the danger of being caught away from the orbital defences, allowing his fleet to close the range.

“Tactical, see if you can locate the enemy flagship,” he ordered, as the range continued to close. They would be in firing range in just under a minute. “If you can…”

“Negative,” the tactical officer said. “They’re using standard datanet transmission protocols. If they have a flagship surviving — and they must, because they’re still in good formation — I can’t identify it.”

“Never mind,” Admiral Wilhelm said. There were bare seconds left now. “You may fire at will.”

* * *

“Tactical, you are authorised to open fire,” Arun said, as the enemy fleet finally closed the range into firing position. He had expected Admiral Wilhelm to push it harder, but at least he had given them the time to make a start at some of the repairs and program new targeting patterns into the missile launchers. “Fire at will.”

The tactical officer pushed a single key. “Who’s Will?” He asked. “Missiles away, I repeat, missiles away.”

The superdreadnaught shuddered as it unleashed it’s first massive barrage. The damage the enemy fleet had inflicted during the first round had smashed some of the external racks, but thankfully the majority of them remained intact, allowing them to launch a far more powerful broadside than the enemy would be expecting. The remaining superdreadnaughts and the arsenal ships opened fire at the same time, launching a monstrous spread of missiles towards the enemy fleet. It might not have been quite as big as the massive salvo Admiral Wilhelm’s arsenal ships had launched, but it was almost as terrifying. He hoped Admiral Wilhelm enjoyed being on the receiving end as much as he himself had enjoyed the experience.

“The enemy are launching missiles,” the tactical officer said. The display sparkled with new and deadly icons, far more than he had expected. “They have definitely duplicated the external racks as well.”

Arun muttered a word under his breath in Hindi. “Is there anything of ours that they don’t have?” He asked, angrily. “We fight the war and Admiral Wilhelm picks up the remaining pieces of Empire?”

The display updated again as the superdreadnaughts unleashed a second volley, then a third, trying to hit the enemy as hard as they could. Sophisticated targeting programs isolated the real enemy superdreadnaughts from the hundreds of decoys, retargeting the missiles to ensure that not a one would be wasted. Geek-issue ECM and ECCM was still more advanced, he saw with considerable relief,

but Admiral Wilhelm's inventors were catching up quickly. If they had held off for another two months, if that had been possible, they would have been a far more formidable threat…

But by then, the Provisional Government would have been firmly entrenched, he realised, grimly. Admiral Wilhelm had timed his offensive perfectly, although he couldn't have known — or had he known — about Daria. If Daria had been working with him, she would have been easily able to ensure that he had direct access to the latest Geek developments, regardless of their security. She had been trusted by almost everyone, including Colin himself. She had had clearance to go everywhere, a snake in the grass, watching and waiting for the moment to strike. He couldn't understand how she had coordinated so many different parts of her plan, or had she? Had she merely taken advantage of events?

He ground his teeth together and watched, grimly, as the first wave of missiles challenged Admiral Wilhelm's defences. The Cottbus Sector Fleet had added quite a few improvements to their software, he saw, but fortunately their hardware wasn't quite as advanced as the Shadow Fleet's systems. The missiles were targeted, but their weapons couldn't move quite fast enough, even though they had used a brute-force approach to building heavy point defence escorts. They carried more weapons than Shadow Fleet ships, but they didn't have the targeting systems… and hundreds of missiles slipped through the gap. As he watched, vengefully, Admiral Wilhelm's starships started to die.

The main body of the missiles had been targeted on the superdreadnaughts, but several hundred had been steered towards the point defence escorts and the battlecruisers. He couldn't understand why Admiral Wilhelm had included them in his wall of battle, unless they were intended for something unexpected, and so he'd added them to the target list. Smaller and weaker than the superdreadnaughts, their speed useless when tied to the wall of battle, they died in their hundreds as the missiles roared down on them. The superdreadnaughts took mounting damage as well, their point defence struggling to the end to protect their command ships, but only marking them out for later attention. The second and third salvos arrived, targeting already damaged ships, punching through weakened armour and cracked hulls, shattering and destroying thousands of lives in split seconds.

"Incoming missiles," the tactical officer said. The enemy fleet missiles might have been less numerous, but they were falling on an already damaged enemy. Arun's point defence had been weakened badly by the previous exchange of fire. "Brace for impact…"

The swarm of missiles fell on the Shadow Fleet. Either because the enemy had identified it as the flagship, or because of the macabre

working of chance, the *General Grant* came in for extra attention. Arun felt himself praying again as the missiles started to crash into the hull, breaking though the shields and slamming deep into his flagship. The entire starship heaved… and then he knew no more.

* * *

"Admiral, the *General Grant* has been destroyed."

Colin winced. He'd wanted to be on the starship, leading the Shadow Fleet into battle, but Arun had talked him out of it. Arun hadn't even made any mistakes, either; who would have believed that the enemy would try something as crazy as bringing arsenal ships out so close to the gravity shadow. They might have lost half their fleet, or all of them; hell, for all he knew, Admiral Wilhelm might have done just that…

But it had worked out for him. He had destroyed almost all of the Shadow Fleet that had been stationed at Earth, leaving only a handful of damaged ships to stagger back towards the orbiting fortresses, just as Colin himself had done, almost a year ago. He'd lost a vast chunk of his own fleet and would lose more when he challenged the defences in orbit around the planet, but the odds still favoured him breaking through the defences and securing control over Earth.

It might be time to start thinking about the emergency plan, Colin thought, and cursed Daria under his breath. She had known all the details of the emergency plan, to flee to the Rim and start again, if the Empire would tolerate another round of Civil War. He hadn't realised how much he had depended on her until she had proven to be a traitor — if the past Empress could be defined as a traitor — and without her contacts, re-establishing himself along the Rim might be difficult. The Empire would get its civil war anyway… Admiral Wilhelm would not be unopposed.

"Damn you," Colin muttered, watching as Admiral Wilhelm's fleet collected itself and formed up again. They were taking their time. He had one last card to play, but he hadn't wanted to use it until they were definitely back against the wall. "What have you cost the Empire, you stupid…?"

"Emergences," the tactical office snapped. New icons appeared on the display, red and ominous. "I have multiple emergences from flicker-space!"

Colin stared.

* * *

“Contacts, right behind us,” the tactical officer shouted. “They’re coming in right behind us!” Admiral Wilhelm stared up at the display as the newcomers arrived. Had Colin pulled a final surprise out of his bag? Where had those ships been? “They’re firing!”

Chapter Forty-Five

"Open fire."

Penny, Joshua and Daria had had a long and barely civil argument about their tactics, but Joshua had carried the day, choosing to bring the fleet out of flicker-space just outside the gravity shadow. Admiral Wilhelm's fleet still packed two fairly intact squadrons of superdreadnaughts, according to the cloaked destroyers that had been keeping an eye on the battle, and was still incredibly dangerous. They had to take them out before they had a chance to react, but taking a superdreadnaught out quickly was almost impossible.

Almost.

The arsenal ships fired, launching a massive spread of missiles towards the rear of Admiral Wilhelm's fleet, followed rapidly by the superdreadnaughts as they flushed their external racks. Joshua had ordered — and it had been another point of contention between him and Daria — that the superdreadnaughts were to hold back their internal tubes for the moment, removing several thousand missiles from the wall of death that was now racing towards the completely surprised Admiral Wilhelm. Penny didn't want to think about what was going through his mind, or the inevitable consequences when the missiles finally started to strike home and annihilate his fleet, but she knew there was little choice. Admiral Wilhelm, and the Admirals who followed him, had broken their oaths and become mad dogs that had to be put down.

And if that were the case, she wondered, what did that make her and Joshua, or Daria herself for that matter? They'd betrayed their oaths a thousand times over, first when she'd abandoned Percival just before his death — although that hadn't entirely been her doing — and then many times since, from the betrayal of the scorching fleet to the decision to take command of the Empress's Fleet and lead it against their former comrades and allies. They'd burned all their bridges now and all that was left was to hope that they won… and that Daria would keep her word. She doubted it, somehow; Daria would view Joshua as a threat to her position, the only other person left who could oppose her successfully. She wouldn't allow them to live.

She looked over at Joshua, watching the missiles burning towards their targets, and shivered. Joshua looked as he had on the bridge at Morrison, when he'd unleashed the fire of the first Imperial Navy arsenal ships on the trapped rebel fleet, grim and determined to punch through all opposition to defeat the enemy. It was good to see the old Joshua back, but she had no idea how long it would last. He, too, had

to know that he would be expendable as soon as the battle was lost.

"Missiles away, sir," the tactical officer said. "Impact in seventeen seconds."

Penny nodded curtly. Admiral Wilhelm's forces had focused all of their point defence units and systems towards the Shadow Fleet's remaining units, not covering their rear. They could hardly have missed the fleet as it flickered into existence, but it would take time to redeploy their units, time they didn't possess. Their remaining point defence ships were all badly out of position to help cover the superdreadnaughts… and Joshua had fired enough missiles to smoother all of the superdreadnaughts, preventing them from even helping each other. They had to look to their own defence now.

"Good," Joshua said, calmly. "Continue to analyse their point defence patterns."

Penny followed his line of logic. It was possible, with the fleet in such a bad position, that the point defence gunners would act to protect the flagship, at the expense of the remaining superdreadnaughts. It would be futile — Joshua had fired enough missiles to destroy a fleet twice the size of Admiral Wilhelm's remaining ships — but it was human nature. If they were kind enough to identify the flagship, Joshua's follow-up salvos would target it for special attention. Assuming, of course, that it survived round one.

Her gaze fell on the long-range display. The Shadow Fleet, what was left of it, was falling back in good order and linking into the planet's defences. She'd studied the records Daria had brought with her carefully and knew just how powerful the defences actually were. Earth wouldn't be easy to take now that Colin and his allies had built in additional defences and surprises, most of them Geek-level. The long-range missile bombardment tactic wouldn't work again. They would have to take the system honestly if Colin decided to make a fight of it.

"Incoming missiles," the tactical officer added. Admiral Wilhelm had managed to get at least one spread of missiles off, but it was far too late. "Point defence systems online and awaiting the word."

"Fire at will," Joshua ordered.

* * *

"Incoming missiles, incoming missiles!"

Admiral Wilhelm clutched the side of his command chair as an impossible fleet spawned an impossible flight of missiles, over three hundred thousand missiles racing towards his position. He had *known* that he was winning the fight… and then somehow Colin and his

rebels had pulled a massive surprise right out of their hats. He couldn't believe what he was looking at; the commander of that fleet had to be a madman or a genius or both. No one would have risked coming out so close to the gravity shadow with superdreadnaughts unless they were completely insane…

But it didn't matter. "Hold our position and swing the point defence around to engage," he ordered, falling back on older orders from his Academy days. The enemy ships had caught them right out of position, but he still had some fight left in him. "Lock missiles on the enemy fleet and fire as you bear."

The superdreadnaught rocked as it unleashed half a broadside towards the enemy fleet, the missiles altering course and flying directly into the heart of their formation, followed by hundreds more. It was pitiful compared to the wall of missiles bearing down on them, but it would hopefully force the enemy to devote time and attention to covering themselves, rather than pounding on his fleet. He didn't know *how* Colin and his rebels had pulled off such a masterpiece of coordination, but it was clear now that he had underestimated them from the start. If he'd known that Colin had been so capable, he would have swallowed his hopes to make himself Emperor and accepted whatever position he could obtain in the new order.

"Missiles away, sir," the tactical officer said. "Enemy missiles entering point defence range now."

Our inner point defence range, Admiral Wilhelm thought grimly. The destroyers, gunboats and cruisers that mounted the outer point defence systems were all badly out of position. Gunboats and destroyers could flit here and there like birds, rather than the ponderous superdreadnaughts, but it still took time to get them to the right positions… and the coordination network was about to take a hammering. He knew that without having to think about it. His fleet was about to have the living shit beaten out of it. The losses might even include a superdreadnaught called…

"Point defence engaging now," the tactical officer said.

They might as well not have bothered, Admiral Wilhelm realised, his thoughts drawn back to the oncoming wall of red icons. The pulsars and point defence units mounted on the hull of the superdreadnaughts were doing what they could, but they might as well have been spitting into the wind. Hundreds of missiles died, but hundreds of thousand survived, falling into their terminal attack profiles and angling in towards his ships. He found himself grasping the handles of his chair as he braced for the impact he knew would be coming…

The first superdreadnaught, bringing up the rear of his fleet, was hit by seventy missiles in quick succession. It never stood a chance. Its

shields went down almost at once and the remaining missiles poured into the hull, exploding within the starship's interior and blowing it apart in a massive burst of superhot plasma. A second superdreadnaught staggered and, for a moment, he thought it had survived for a few moments longer, but then it exploded and joined its companion in death. A third and a fourth were badly damaged and fell out of formation, their drive fields billowing as their destabilised, while plasma and air leaked out of a dozen breaches in the hull. He looked at the datanet downloads from the ships, before they cut off abruptly, and knew that there would be no point in trying to repair them. They were far beyond the point where any shipyard, even the ones orbiting Jupiter, could repair the damage.

"Here they come, sir," the tactical officer said. "It was a honour to have served with you, sir."

Admiral Wilhelm looked up at the display and nodded once. The wave of missiles had targeted his ship and there were too many of them to stop, or even survive. The first hammerblows rang through the ship, knocking down the shields and destroying the shield generators as they struggled to cope with the massive feedback from the shields and their collapse, leaving the superdreadnaught defenceless. It heaved time and time again, massive red icons flaring into existence on the internal display, before the power failed and the gravity vanished. The inner core of the superdreadnaught, the most protected section of the ship, cracked and buckled under the pounding as consoles exploded and flames lashed through the ship.

He died before he had a chance to realise that there had been three fleets, not two, in the battle.

* * *

Penny watched Joshua watching in stony-faced silence as the two remaining squadrons of Admiral Wilhelm's fleet were decimated. He'd seen such damage before, even inflicted such damage, but it was still terrifying. The post-war Empire, whoever ended up in control, would have to rebuild most of the Imperial Navy from scratch, just to remain competitive. The massive salvos of missiles, far more than had been imagined back in the old days before the rebellion, had changed the face of warfare.

"Admiral, the two remaining superdreadnaughts are signalling their surrender," the communications officer said. The remains of the massive salvo had burned themselves out or expended themselves on smaller ships, allowing two superdreadnaughts to escape lightly. The sole survivors of eighteen superdreadnaughts, an invincible force

before the war, had been damaged, but they were still capable of operations. Another salvo, however, would reduce them to dust and ash. “They’re asking that we accept before they lose control of their power cores and explode.”

Joshua altered the display, bringing up a near-space scan revealing the thousands of lifepods drifting through space, signalling for help. The long-standing convention had been that the victors would pick up the lifepods, but the battle was far from over and he couldn’t spare any ships to recover survivors. Penny found herself trying to recall her basic survival training. A lifepod could keep its recommended number of passengers alive for quite some time, but they were completely helpless if some sadistic bastard decided to start picking them off for target practice.

“Contact Admiral Wilhelm’s remaining light ships,” Joshua ordered, finally. “Inform them that they are our designated recovery ships. They are to pick up the lifepods and the crew from those superdreadnaughts.” He brought up a visual of the two damaged ships and frowned. “And then contact the superdreadnaughts. I want their weapons and shields completely deactivated now. If there are any signs that they have reactivated them we will open fire without further warning.”

He turned his attention back to the display. “And launch another flight of probes towards the defenders,” he added. “I want a complete update on their current status.”

“Admiral, Her Majesty wishes to address the rebels,” the communications officer injected. “She’s transmitting now.”

* * *

Colin hadn’t wasted the time that Daria’s fleet had brought him when it engaged Admiral Wilhelm at what was, effectively, point-blank range. He’d managed to get the remaining starships into a defensive formation, orbiting beside the command fortresses and the other defences. He’d also transferred himself from the assigned command fortress to a completely different fortress, aware that Daria had probably known which fortress had been assigned the task of coordinating the defence. It didn’t sit well with him, but he had already decided that he wasn’t going to run to the Rim, but die in defence of the new order he’d created.

“David, we’re going to need you,” he said, keying his private channel. He’d hoped not to have to deploy the final surprise, but there were four squadrons of superdreadnaughts out there, with escorts. They would get hurt, but they had the firepower to punch though

Earth's defences and force them to surrender. "Get your people into position now…"

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, "we're picking up a message from the fleet."

"On screen," Colin ordered.

Daria's face appeared in front of him. She'd altered her face slightly, he saw, but it was still recognisably her. It took him a moment to realise that she now reassembled herself as she had been fifty years ago, before she had been forced to flee Earth and take up residence along the Rim. Unlike so many others who had fled the Empire, she had barely altered herself, either in a display of bravado or vanity. Cordova had told him, when they'd had a moment to chat before he had left to go to his starship, that there had even been a fashion to have pleasure slaves in the image of the Empress.

"They like to think that they were fucking her," he'd said. "It was a power thing for that generation."

Daria's voice was icy cold. "I am the Empress Janice," she said, her face cold and very composed, as if she had spoken to God personally and received answers she didn't like. "I was forced to flee Earth by men and women of the Thousand Families who feared that I would upset their tidy little doomed worlds. I had acted to save the Empire from the doom that overtook it. My reward was to be forced to flee, with dogs snapping at my heels, and hide along the Rim until my time came again."

She paused. "My time is now.

"In the name of the Empire, I call upon Earth to surrender without further struggle," she continued. "Your position is hopeless. Bombarding the planet would be an easy task for my fleet. Your defences cannot hope to stand us off for long, nor do I have any incentive to spare the lives of those who oppose my rightful return to the throne. Give up the struggle, surrender yourselves, and you have my word that you will be treated with honour. Fight… and you will be destroyed. You have five minutes to decide."

"Open a channel," Colin ordered, as Daria's image vanished from the display. He waited for the communications officer's nod. "Daria — Janice — this is Colin Harper, President of the Empire. Your time is over. You know this as well as I do. The old order died the day that Earth fell — indeed, before then, when I led my people into revolution and exposed the Empire's weakness. Admiral Wilhelm, Stacy Roosevelt, Tiberius Cicero and even you attempted to restore the old order, but its time has passed. The Empire's iron grip is no more. You may win this fight, you may destroy Earth and all who defy you, but you will not be able to restore the Empire you once ruled."

He took a breath. "I'm sorry, but I won't surrender, I can't," he

continued. “The new order, one where democracy and justice and the rule of law push the Empire into reformation, must survive… and it will survive. The worst you could do is shatter the Empire and push us all into barbarism. You could not rebuild the old order.

* * *

Penny looked up at Joshua. His face was expressionless.

“You can stop this now,” Colin continued, almost pleadingly. “End this. Surrender your fleet. We won’t kill you, or any who followed you, even after what you did at the Cicero Estate.” Penny saw Joshua’s head jerk at that. “Please, end this now, before more people have to die.”

The signal stopped. “The Cicero Estate?” Penny asked. “What happened there…?”

“I don’t know,” Joshua said. He tapped his console. “I know who will, however…”

Daria’s face appeared in front of them. “Continue the advance,” she ordered, crisply. “If Colin is bound and determined to make a fight of it, we will finish him and…”

“Tell me something,” Joshua said, cutting her off. “What happened at the Cicero Estate?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Daria said, her face expressionless. “Concentrate on the advance, Admiral. Victory is within our grasp.”

“No,” Joshua said, angrily. “You will tell me what happened at the Cicero Estate.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. “Tiberius Cicero had a plan to… remove Colin from play,” Daria said, finally. “It went spectacularly wrong, he ended up dead, and I had to flee.” Penny saw Joshua wince. He’d liked the young Cicero. Tiberius had even brought him out of retirement to command the fleet at Morrison. “Colin is currently blaming the entire disaster on me because I was the only survivor on the wrong side.”

Joshua lifted an eyebrow. “Indeed?”

“Indeed,” Daria said. They locked eyes again for a long chilling moment. “Attend to your duty, Admiral.”

The tactical officer interrupted. “Admiral, we have something odd approaching from the direction of Earth,” he said. Penny felt a moment of relief that the confrontation had been ended, although she wasn’t sure any longer what side she was really on, or even what side Joshua was on. “It doesn’t match anything in the tactical database at all.”

“Show me,” Joshua snapped, pushing Daria to one side. He paused as he stared down at the odd readings. Penny followed his gaze, but couldn’t make head or tail of them. It was almost as if they were about to be attacked by shuttles in a boarding action, never mind the fact that it would be certain suicide. “What the hell are they?”

Chapter Forty-Six

"All Reds, this is Red Leader," Captain Edward Stalker said, as the fighters roared towards their targets. They couldn't see the superdreadnaughts ahead of them, but the live feed coming directly into their heads from the computers and sensors showed them everything. The superdreadnaughts looked like an impregnable wall of sheer force, glaring around them with implacable sensors, but they were puzzled. The starfighters had been crossed several times by sensor scans. "Mark your men and prepare to dance."

He concentrated, designating superdreadnaught targets for each of the starfighters. Individually, no starfighter could inflict much damage, even with the shield-buster missiles, unless they loaded antimatter warheads and they weren't desperate enough to break *that* taboo, but as a mass, they were almost unstoppable. They also had weaknesses. Like every manned ship, they were limited to speeds that the compensators could compensate for, or their pilots would be killed long before they reached firing range. The enemy, once they had a chance to adapt and see what they were up against, would sweep starfighters out of space with ease.

A voice crackled away in his helmet. "Missiles launched, now," it said, as the orbital fortresses opened fire. A spread of missiles, seemingly targeted on the superdreadnaughts, but in fact targeted on their smaller escorts, would provide a distraction. One threat wouldn't be lethal, but combined, they could be horrifyingly dangerous, at least according to the simulations. Stalker and his men would be the first to try their ships and tactics out for rear. "Impact, twenty-seven seconds and counting."

"You heard the man," Stalker said, linking back into the command network. His own target, a massive *Admiral*-class superdreadnaught, blinked on and off in his mental vision, permanently marked as a target for the two missiles carried under his wings. There was little *point* in designing the craft to fly through atmospheres, but the Geeks had insisted… and, besides, they did look awesome. "Prepare to kick in the drives and move."

The missiles roared down on their targets, forcing the smaller escorts to concentrate on defending themselves, and the starfighters kicked in their drives, taking advantage of the pattern. Like so much of the Imperial Navy's established formations, the starfighter formation looked like organised chaos, as if the pilots were all going their own way and ignoring orders. Unlike missiles, which had to travel in fairly straight lines towards their targets, the starfighters could move and twist at will. They were incredibly hard to hit even

without the missiles and decoys distracting attention, forcing the escorts to shoot almost randomly. Seven starfighters were lost to the desperate attacks from the escorts, but the remainder survived, racing onwards towards the superdreadnaughts, which were beginning to spit out their own point defence.

"Evasive manoeuvres, boys and girls," Stalker said, as the command network reconfigured itself around the squadrons. There was no longer any point in trying to coordinate the whole battle, not when the targets had been selected and squadrons assigned to focus on their own targets. The bull sessions on the carrier had concluded that, sooner or later, the starfighters would face other starfighters piloted by Empire loyalists or warlords like Admiral Wilhelm, but until then the skies were clear. "Lock and load."

The closing speed was terrifyingly fast, bringing the starfighters close enough to the superdreadnaught to see it with the naked eye, if the starfighters had had open canopies. It was even more terrifying seeing it though the sensors, watching the power curves fluctuating over the superdreadnaught as it concentrated on trying to blaze the starfighters out of space, knowing that even flying too close to those beams of destructive energy would be fatal. The starfighters only protection was speed and their tiny size. There were standard capital missiles that were larger than the fighters.

"Targets designated now," he said, as they swept down on the superdreadnaught's shields. This was the most dangerous part of the mission, according to the simulations. If the superdreadnaught had time to divert power to the shields and extend them outwards, they might succeed in swatting the starfighters like flies. He had a third of his sensor capability watching for any telltale power flares, but they would have bare seconds to react. "Acknowledge target designations… and fire!"

There was a second reason why it was the most dangerous part of the mission. While launching the missiles, the fighters had to fly in as nearly a straight line as possible, long enough for any point defence computer to lock onto them and burn them out of space. Stalker held himself in a straight line as long as he dared — about three seconds — and as soon as the missiles were away, yanked the fighter into a tight turn, barely avoiding a flash of green light that would have killed his craft if it had been a few meters closer. Nine of the starfighters survived the experience; two of the remaining twelve were swatted by point defence systems just after they launched their missiles. The final craft, it seemed, had crashed into the shields, although no one knew for sure. There was no way to know until the battle was analysed later, if there was a later.

"Back to Point One, guys," he carolled, as the missiles flashed

towards their targets. The superdreadnaught, suddenly aware of the danger, had devoted everything it had to vaporising the missiles, but it was too late to make any real difference. The shield-busters reached the shields, passed *through* the shields, and impacted against the hull. He saw, through the sensors, a tearing series of explosions that crippled the superdreadnaught, knocking it out of the line of battle and causing its drive field to collapse. Stranded, whoever won the battle would salvage it, if it could be repaired. “Status report; all ships, check in.”

He listened, quickly, to the updates. A third of the starfighter force had been lost, but they’d killed or crippled nearly half the enemy force. Under more normal circumstances, it was a very favourable rate of exchange, but with the Shadow Fleet still badly crippled, the issue was still far from decided.

“Ships with missiles, reform on Singh,” Stalker ordered tightly. “Everyone else, return to the barn.”

The starfighters fell away from the superdreadnaughts, racing back towards the carrier. There was no longer any point in trying to hide; they had to reload and get back out before the Empress located the carrier and attempted to kill it. The carrier was almost defenceless… and if it were killed, the starfighters would be worse than useless.

* * *

“Interesting,” Joshua said, as the tiny impossible craft vanished back into the darkness of space. “We saw something like that at Second Harmony, but they had to use gunboats and they got picked off with ease once we were alert to the threat. They seem to have learned to combine the different systems into a whole new fighting machine.”

Penny stared at him. “Admiral, those craft have wrecked about half the fleet,” she said, knowing that Joshua would listen to her. Admiral Percival would have quite happily ridden the plan down in flames, although hadn’t actually commanded in battle until the very end of First Harmony. It hadn’t been his life at stake. “What happens if they come back?”

“They wouldn’t have broken off unless they ran out of missiles,” Joshua said, logically. “The best place for them would have been to remain amidst our ships, where we had to be careful what kind of weapons we deployed to shoot them out of space, but they broke off to rearm.”

“Most of them,” Penny said. The remaining fighters were

swooping down on another hapless superdreadnaught. Now fully alert to the threat, the point defence networks were pouring a staggering amount of fire towards the starfighters, but the tiny craft always seemed to be able to dodge, whatever firepower was deployed. Hitting even one of them probably counted as a major victory, if it had been an intentional hit. It was rather more likely that one craft would swerve into the path of one bolt while avoiding a second. “Admiral, can we still win this battle?”

“Perhaps,” Joshua said. He looked down at the display, showing the orbiting point defences. “Tactical, lock onto the fortresses… and open fire.”

The superdreadnaught shuddered as it launched a spread of missiles from its internal tubes, joined by the remainder of the superdreadnaughts a moment later. It was a weaker attack than it should have been, Penny realised; two of the superdreadnaughts might not have been crippled by the fighters, but they had lost some of their internal tubes. It had been sheer luck and excessive over-design that had prevented some of the loaded missiles from detonating within the superdreadnaught and starting a chain reaction that would have destroyed the ship.

“Missiles away,” the tactical officer reported. There was a long pause. “Incoming fire from the fortresses, targeted mainly on the superdreadnaughts, but enough targeted on the escorts to destroy them.”

“Understood,” Joshua said. He scowled. “Pull the escorts back towards the superdreadnaughts. Rotate starships through the formation so that fresh units are facing the attack.”

“Admiral, we have located the base ship,” the sensor officer injected. A new starship, barely more than a bulk freighter, blinked up on the display. It had originally been classed as an arsenal ship, but tactical had downgraded the threat because it hadn’t moved up into firing position. “One of the drones caught a shot of the fighters returning to the ship.”

Joshua smiled coldly. “Order a battlecruiser squadron to attend to that ship,” he ordered, flatly. “Take it out before the fighters can rearm and return to the attack.”

A new alarm blared. “Incoming ships,” the tactical officer said. Joshua whirled to face the main display as new red icons flickered into existence. *Their* commander hadn’t run the insane risk of flickering in so close to the gravity shadow, but they were still close enough to block his fleet from retreat. “Source… sir, they’re the first-rank ships!”

* * *

Jason Cordova hadn't told Colin what he had in mind. It would only have upset him.

He'd taken command of the *Random Numbers* again, after the massacre and his own official clearing of all charges relating to the attempted murder of Colin, but he knew better than Colin that there would be no peace. If — when, as Tiberius would have told Daria the truth — the truth about the Dathi came out, he would still be the most hated man in the entire Empire. Colin might believe that he could ensure that there would be no official punishment for Cordova, but Cordova knew that that wasn't the issue at hand. The court of public opinion, the same court that had opposed any relaxation on the rules surrounding aliens, would condemn him and anyone associated with him. He couldn't — he wouldn't — allow that to happen to Kathy. She deserved much better than him.

"That's the main body of the Empress's fleet," his tactical officer said. Cordova had stripped the *Random Numbers* of anything other than a skeleton and volunteer crew, not least because he didn't expect to be coming back and he'd dragged his crew into enough tight spots. Colin and the others desperately preparing for the attack hadn't noticed. They hadn't had enough experienced personnel to question while some personnel were available, even if they had had time to wonder. "I still cannot identify which ship is hers."

Cordova smiled. The Empress — he refused to think of her as Daria any longer — might have been smart enough to assemble an entire secret fleet, but she had a weakness. Like him, she had been brought up as an Imperial Navy officer. Like him, she had a soft spot for any ship she had personally commanded… and the *General Cromwell*, a superdreadnaught holding position towards the rear of the Empress's formation, had once been under her commander. He'd known the moment he'd studied a list of the four superdreadnaught squadrons that had vanished during the Battle of Earth. Her ship, her crew… maybe even a commanding officer who'd served on the ship during her era. It wasn't impossible for an officer, with the right connections, to serve on the same ship for his or her entire career… and Daria had had links right into the heart of the Thousand Families. It would have passed unnoticed in the Imperial Navy. Everyone did it.

"There," he said, confidently. The *General Cromwell*, Janice's old command, and unless he'd misread her completely, her current command ship. There was no way to confirm it, short of hacking into the communications network between the enemy ships, but he was sure that he was right. It wasn't even something Colin would have thought of. He'd always stolen his command ships from the Empire. "Helm, set course for that ship."

He'd cloaked the *Random Numbers* as soon as it had left the

gravity shadow and circled around to lurk in hiding and it was unlikely in the extreme that they had been detected, although the haze of sensor distortion caused by so many detonating warheads and dying ships was proving a problem for the cloaking device. He'd sneaked up on superdreadnaught before, back while he'd been hiding out along the Rim, but now it was serious. It wasn't a game anymore.

"Course set," the helmsman said. "It's been a pleasure, sir."

Cordova nodded and settled back into his command chair. "Engage."

* * *

"Those ships aren't going to be a threat to us," Daria snapped. Joshua was proving something of a disappointment to her. The arrival of ships from the first-rank worlds changed nothing. They had no superdreadnaughts, no fighters and the largest ship they had was a battleship. They weren't going to be able to stop her from regaining her throne. She'd come too far and burned too many bridges to turn away now. "Hold your ground and they'll break over us."

"They have enough missile launchers to complete our destruction," Joshua countered, angrily. Daria spotted the blonde girl behind him and knew, with a certainty that transcended rational thought, that it was her who'd tried to talk Joshua out of continuing the engagement. She wouldn't survive once Daria had returned to her throne. She would make a pile of her enemies skulls and use them for unsightly purposes. "We're trapped, Your Majesty. We cannot even break off from the engagement. The most we can do is destroy Earth and that would result in our destruction."

"I will not surrender," Daria snapped. "This is still hope…"

"Incoming," the tactical officer screamed. Daria spun around to stare at the tactical display. The hazy icon of a cloaked ship was closing in on the *General Cromwell*. "They're going to ram us!"

"Engage it," Daria snapped. "Take it out!"

"It's too late," the tactical officer said. "It's too close…"

The *Random Numbers* rammed the *General Cromwell* amidships. At such speeds, the mass of a light cruiser could be deadly, but Cordova had added a final bitter jest. Having decided to commit suicide and take Daria with him, he had loaded as much antimatter as he could beg, borrow or steal from the Jupiter Shipyards, choosing to ignore the risks of storing it on a starship. Even if Daria did manage to destroy them before they could ram, the explosion would still be lethal to her ship, but as it was it didn't matter. The resulting explosion blotted both ships out of existence.

* * *

"Holy shit," someone breathed.

Colin couldn't disagree. The final moments of the *Random Numbers* had only been seen by a drone, launched by the first-rank starships, but the antimatter blast had been seen everywhere. It was going to cause problems on Earth, he realised, grimly. So much radiation and other effects would harm the entire planet. The Empire's ban on antimatter outside certain highly secure research labs hadn't been purely to deprive everyone of a useful, if desperate, weapon.

And the fighting seemed to have paused.

"Raise the enemy flagship," he ordered, tiredly. After that, he suspected that whoever was in command would be feeling reasonable. The blast would have blown our sensors and fucked up tactical systems all over their remaining fleet. They might have killed the starfighter carrier — Colin hadn't allowed himself any time to grieve for David Houston and the remains of his crew — but their position was hopeless. They had to know it. "Tell them… that we will accept their surrender."

* * *

Joshua's face was expressionless as the signal came in. The *General Monck* hadn't been badly touched by the antimatter blast, but dozens of other ships had been crippled. The communications network was completely off-line, along with dozens of other vital systems… and they couldn't be re-established in time.

"Sir?" Penny asked, grimly. Daria's death in that terrifying moment when matter met antimatter and complete annihilation resulted had left Joshua in undisputed command of the fleet. It had become a poisoned chalice. "Sir, what do we do?"

Joshua pulled himself to his feet. "Anne, signal the fleet," he ordered, in a tone that could not be challenged or disputed. "Inform them that I am ordering a full and unconditional surrender. They are to accept that and obey all orders from the victors." He smiled bleakly, as if there was no humour left in his soul. "I dare say that they will treat us under the Moscow Accords if we surrender promptly."

He looked over at Anne. "Until the Marines arrive, you will command the fleet," he added. His face twisted for a long moment, as if he wanted to say something profound, but no longer cared. Penny realised, with a chill, just what he had in mind. The crews might be treated under the Accords, but Joshua himself couldn't be. He'd

betrayed the Provisional Government. As the senior survivor, he would be the scapegoat for Daria's crimes. "It was a honour to serve with you all again."

Joshua left the bridge, not looking back.

A few minutes later, they heard the single shot.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Two months had passed since the Second Battle of Earth.

Colin watched from the balcony as Parliament was called to order, the first real Parliament representing the entire Empire. It had taken nearly a month to get ships out to Cottbus in the wake of Admiral Wilhelm's defeat and Joshua's suicide, but when they arrived they'd been relieved and surprised to discover that the sector was under control and Admiral Garland had occupied most of the planets. The remaining three sectors had lost their warlords in the Battle of Earth, along with their sector fleets, and offered little resistance when the Empire reclaimed them. Like Cottbus, they'd been military dictatorships, governed by men who'd seen a chance for real power at last and taken it. Some warlords still existed out along the Rim, but with all of the Empire's superdreadnaughts accounted for, they would eventually either come in from the cold or devolve into pirate groups. They wouldn't remain a threat for long.

He smiled as René Goscinny, newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister of the Empire, stood up and started a long speech. The Empire was changing every day. Now that the Thousand Families had been effectively destroyed, either by Daria or by being removed to a colony world where they could live for the remainder of their lives in peace, economic life in the Empire was changing rapidly. Kathy had told him that the first-rank worlds would have an advantage, now that the monopolies and proscribed technology had been rescinded, in research and development, although some of the new combines would start catching up quickly. It was a Darwinian struggle, the survival of the fittest, but one that would end up serving the Empire well. The first-rank status, conferred upon almost all worlds, would lead to some unrest, but eventually it would all settle down. He smiled again, watching Marius Roodt, the President of the Chamber, and Blondel Dupre, Prime Minister, bring Parliament to order. They might be contentious at times, but after Daria's desperate attempt to seize the power for herself — again — they had learned a few lessons. The new Empire would be very different to the old. It was almost a shame that he wouldn't be there to see it.

"You're still determined to leave?"

Kathy Tyler's voice stopped him as he left the Parliament Chamber and headed back to his office. She was two months pregnant, according to his reports, but she showed no sign of the baby yet. It was unusual, to say the least, for a high-born mother to carry the baby to term in her own womb, but Kathy had decided that it was the least she could do for her dead lover. Jason Cordova's death in action had

almost broken her, but she'd pulled through and helped push the entire economic restructuring package through Parliament. It hadn't been a perfect success, but in the long run, the Empire would be stronger than ever before.

"They don't want me looking over their shoulders now," he said, as she fell into step beside him. It wasn't entirely true — he could have carried on as President if he had wanted the post — but he had felt that it would be better to leave. Besides, he really didn't want the position of President, or Emperor. He'd felt forced to consider the latter during the darkest days of the war, but it wasn't a post he wanted. Look what it had done to Daria and her allies. "Besides, I wrote the term limits in myself, back at the beginning. If I stayed, I'd be exceeding my own rules."

Kathy smiled bleakly. "I understand," she said. "Do you already have a ship lined up for the flight?"

Colin hesitated. "The *Jason Cordova*," he said, finally. Kathy winced, but said nothing else. Too many people, heroes and villains, had died in the closing hours of the war. "The Geeks designed her as a battlecruiser, so I should be well-protected out there past the Rim. A handful of experienced hands, but mainly a new crew, now that the Academy is churning out qualified officers rather than well-connected arseholes."

He scowled. It had been Joshua who'd redesigned the Imperial Navy Academy; Joshua, who had led the Empress's fleet into battle… and, in the end committed suicide, unwilling to go on. Colin would have had no choice, but to execute him if he had lived, but he missed the older man. Unlike so many from the Shadow Fleet and the ranks of the rebellion, he had understood the underlying problems of the Imperial Navy. His program of careful gradual change had to be continued. There was no real choice.

"Good luck, then," Kathy said. She held out a hand. Colin shook it firmly. "I'll see you when you return to Earth."

She walked off, leaving Colin alone with his thoughts. So many had died; David Houston, Arun Prabhu and so many others, heroes and villains, friends and enemies. The Empire's civil war had reshaped everything, but it might have ended so badly, or it might have pulled the Empire down to barbarism. They had been incredibly lucky.

And now the first-rank worlds are building superdreadnaughts of their own, he thought, grimly. That was going to be a problem for the new government. They'd devolved the Empire's government as much as possible, but it wasn't going to be easy to sort out new lines of responsibility and power. No one wanted to be oppressed again, even if they had to bankrupt themselves to produce a new squadron of superdreadnaughts, or consider limiting the Imperial Navy. The

growing threat from pirates out along the Rim as the wave of change reached the Rim would force new deployments, but who knew where *that* would end? Perhaps the Imperial Navy would assign a squadron of ships to each world and allow them to forge links with their bases, or perhaps…

He shook his head. It wasn't his problem any more.

It was an hour later when he arrived at the detention centre. He might not have had any official status any more, apart from Commanding Officer of the *Jason Cordova*, but General Neil Frandsen wasn't going to allow him to remain unprotected. He had assigned an entire platoon of Marines to Colin's personal guard, despite his objections, and an oversized Company to Colin's ship. The Marine Corps had come through the civil war and rebellion almost unchanged, although Colin had signed orders to expand their recruiting base before he had left office. They were still the unyielding guardians of honour and, perhaps, the dream that had inspired the Empire.

"Stay here," he ordered, before stepping into the cell. The single figure looked up from her chair. Carola Wilhelm, he realised, had loved her man. He was dead now, at Joshua's hands, and she was alone. Their power base had been shattered by the rebellion on Cottbus. Even if she escaped — and she had, briefly, with Gwendolyn's help before being recaptured — she had nowhere to go. "Hello, Carola."

Carola's voice was battered, almost old. "Fuck you."

"Your husband is dead," Colin said. "Your lies have been exposed. Most of your allies on Earth have been arrested and either sentenced to exile or a penal world. That just leaves the issue of what to do with you."

Carola snorted. "And what are you doing here?"

"Tying up loose ends," Colin said, flatly. "There's a general amnesty for those who served under your husband, or Daria, provided that they surrender and make a full accounting of their actions while they worked for the enemies. Some of them, the people who betrayed their oaths, have been sentenced to penal colonies, but others are harder to deal with. Your husband might have mutinied, but so did we."

"You couldn't prosecute him without calling into question your own actions," Carola said. She laughed, rather dryly. "You betrayed your oaths as well, didn't you?"

"Yes," Colin said. He leaned forward. "You seem to fall into a grey area. You swore no oaths, but you definitely waged war on the Empire. We're offering you a choice. The remaining members of the Thousand Families, those who don't want to serve with the new order,

have been moved to Paradise Rest, a former pleasure world…"

"I've heard of that place," Carola said, flatly. "They're going to be bored out of their tiny minds. There's nothing there, but pleasure systems that won't work without the staff, right?"

"Something like that," Colin agreed. There were enough Family Members to create a whole new colony, if they worked together. If not… well, they weren't his problem. If they all starved to death, or down to a level where they could live off the land, it would be their own fault. "Your choice is simple. You can join them, or you can join the population on one of the penal worlds instead."

"Some choice," Carola said, angrily. "A lifetime with the most boring people in existence, including some who would cry for hours if they broke a nail, or life on a hellish world of suffering and death."

Colin didn't deny it. Penal worlds were worlds that were on the margin of being habitable, often populated by unpleasant animals or even diseases that could leap the gap into humanity. The Empire dumped its criminals and outcasts on them in the hope that they could tame the world and make it a profitable colony. Most of them died in the first year, but there were always replacements. The Empire was never short of criminals, rebels, or people who merely offended someone in power.

"It's your choice," he said. "Whichever one you choose, Carola, there will be no turning back."

"Paradise Rest," Carola said. She looked up at him defiantly. "If I go there, I'll be running the place within the year."

Colin shrugged. "Good luck, then," he said. He keyed his communicator as he walked out the door. "Have my shuttle pick me up from here."

The Marines insisted on sweeping the shuttle before allowing Colin to board, but they finally cleared it and allowed him to take the pilot chair, bringing up the shuttle's drives and taking it into orbit. Earth glowed below the shuttle as he turned the ship towards the waiting battlecruiser, his first command that he hadn't actually hijacked from its former commanding officer. The shuttle docked in the shuttlebay and he realised, with some surprise, that he had a reception committee.

"Welcome onboard, sir," his new first officer said, once they were alone. "How does it feel to be back on a starship?"

"Wonderful," Colin said, looking over at Penny. As one of the handful of others who fell into the same grey area, no one was entirely sure what to do with her, so he had offered her the post of first officer. It might have been dangerous, but he owed it to another survivor of Admiral Percival's selfishness. "It's like I've never been away."

He settled into the Captain's chair and felt, for the first time since Admiral Percival had betrayed him, years ago, that he was happy.

"Helm, bring up the drive field," he ordered, calmly. "Set course for the Rim."

* * *

A series of dull thumps echoed through the starship as it settled into orbit, waking Stacy Roosevelt from a fitful sleep. Naked and alone, her hands secured behind her in the private cell, she knew that she was trapped and helpless. The rebels who had liberated her from the prison cell at Cottbus — God alone knew what had happened to Lady Madeline Hohenzollern, as if she cared — had promptly put her in another one. There was apparently a warrant out for her arrest… and, when the ships had arrived from Earth to report that Admiral Wilhelm had been defeated, she had found herself being tried and sentenced. She had gone to sleep in her cell on Cottbus and woken up in a very different cell, being treated like a common prisoner.

The hatch hissed open as her restraints unlocked themselves from the wall. She struggled against them, as she had several times in the last few days — if they had been days — but it was futile. She tried to struggle to her feet, but it was so hard with her hands bound that she felt a brief moment of pleasure when she was able to stand upright. She glared towards the hatch, expecting some leering commoner or depraved guard to come to molest her, but there was nothing.

"You will depart your cells," a cold voice said, so coldly she knew that a machine produced it, rather than anyone human. "You will depart your cells and fall into line."

It wasn't the sort of voice that anyone, even Stacy, would dare to challenge. She limped over to the hatch, feeling her legs trembling from disuse, and staggered out into the corridor. There were other cells, an entire line of them, housing their own naked captives. Some of them looked terrified, others looked defiant and a few even pleaded their innocence, but they were all bound. Male, female, even a pair of aliens, they were naked and at the mercy of their captors.

"You will walk through the door and into the holding area," the voice ordered them. This time, the floor sparkled and *stung* anyone who dared to hesitate. Stacy found herself moving faster than she would have believed possible, following the bare buttocks of a tough-looking man, wondering just what was going to happen to her. She wasn't even sure where she was. The holding area was just as dark and drab as the remainder of the vessel, with shelves of clothing and small bags of equipment, waiting for them

“You will now pay attention,” the voice intoned. Stacy felt her cuffs unlock and pulled her hands free gratefully. Now she could see them properly, she realised that she was wearing metal bracelets that had been bound to each other magnetically. “You have been condemned to a permanent sentence on the planet Cozen. You will be aware that Cozen is a penal world. You will also be aware that there will be no return from the surface.”

The voice paused to allow the prisoners to vent their frustrations, and then continued, as if it hadn’t even been listening. “You will dress yourselves in the outfits provided and inspect the contents of your bags,” it continued. “You are *advised*” — she heard the stress on that word — “to listen carefully to the following lecture. It covers what is known about the world that will be your home for the rest of your lives.”

Stacy tuned it out, knowing that someone in the group would help her. Someone always had helped her, even in the worst moments of her life, and she was sure that it would always continue. The voice coldly described horrors such as monstrous creatures and deadly insects, some of which could kill with a single bite. She barely heard it covering the monsters as she felt a hand settling on her behind, and then reaching around to fondle her most sensitive places. No one had touched her there without her permission.

She spun around, seeing a leering commoner, and slapped him across the face. It should have been enough to stop him in his tracks. Instead, he smacked her back, punching her right on the nose. She fell to the ground, screaming in pain; she’d never been hurt like that before. Her assailant, as naked as she was, leaned over her. She couldn’t take her eyes off his penis as he pressed her down, ignoring her protests. The thought of what would happen when he forced his way into her, or when he started to take her, consumed her. She tried to close her legs, but he pushed them open hard enough to hurt…

Something *snapped* in the air and her assailant fell back, rubbing his own rear.

“You will pay attention,” the voice said, and continued describing the horrors awaiting them. Stacy screamed at the voice, demanding medical treatment for what she was sure was a life-threatening injury, until something snapped again. Pain flared out over her back, forcing her back down and, somehow, she kept her mouth shut. Her assailant leered at her, his face a dark promise of what awaited her, but he made no other move. It wasn’t as if she had anywhere to go.

“This lecture is concluded,” the voice said finally. It didn’t even sound if it was enjoying a captive audience. “You will now board your transport capsules.”

The interior of the capsule was as dark and cold as the grave.

Stacy had barely had time to dress, despite the blood seeping into her outfit, before the transport capsule moved and plummeted down towards the planet. Her new home. She would spend the rest of her life there, she saw now, servicing commoners with her body, for she had nothing else to offer them. She had nothing, but a title that meant nothing and a mind that knew nothing they needed. Her life was about to become hell.

Stacy screamed all the way down.

The End